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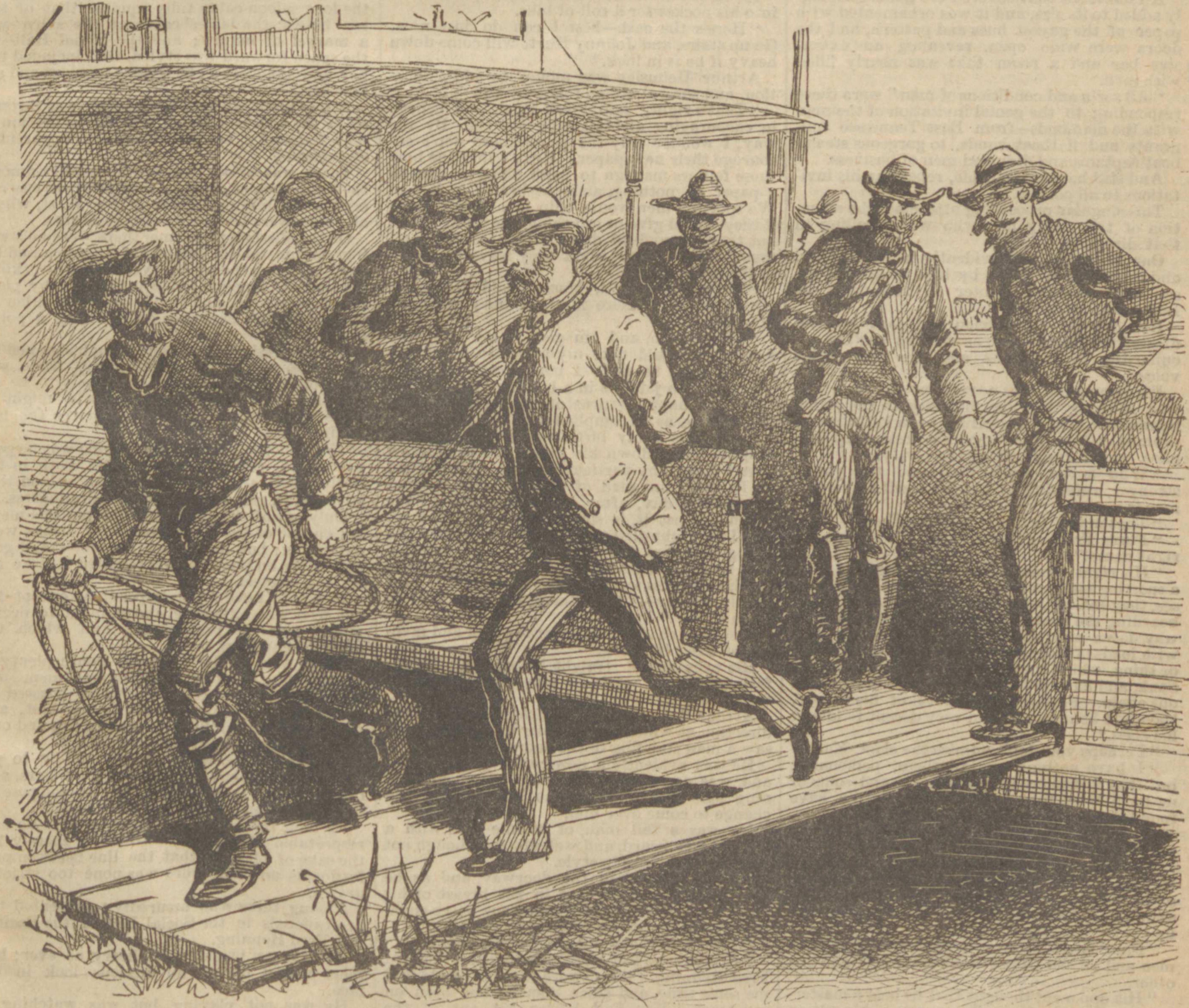
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No. 274

FLUSH FRED, THE MISSISSIPPI SPORT; *Or, TOUGH TIMES IN TENNESSEE.*

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "MISSISSIPPI MOSE," "BUCK FARLEY," "BILL, THE BLIZZARD," ETC., ETC., ETC.



ONE OF THE MOST EAGER OF THE TENNESSEANS HURRIED ASHORE OVER THE PLANK, LEADING FLUSH FRED BY THE ROPE,
THE NOOSE BEING AROUND HIS NECK.

Flush Fred,

THE MISSISSIPPI SPORT;

OR,

Tough Times in Tennessee.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "MONTANA NAT," "BILL, THE BLIZZARD," "BUCK FARLEY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FLUSH FRED'S BIRTHDAY.

"WALK in, my friends! Come up, boys! Step lively now! Walk in and make yourselves merry, if not happy! Don't be backward in coming forward! All's free. It's my treat today."

The person who issued these cheerful invitations in a hilarious tone and with a persuasive manner was a young man, a little above the medium height, with dark hair and eyes, and with a bright and intelligent face that was almost handsome.

His dress was that of a gentleman, stylishly cut and of fine material, and the only things about him which could be considered flashy were his large diamonds, one of which shone in a ring on each hand, and the third blazed as a stud on his shirt bosom.

The brilliant stones "gave him away" at once, and indicated his occupation.

Before the war, as at all other periods, it was the custom of successful gamblers to invest their surplus funds in costly diamonds, as representing wealth in a portable form, and as being easy to convert into cash when the circumstances required a "stake."

As the circus man is crazy for a farm, so the river sport was addicted to diamonds.

He stood at the front of a saloon on the levee in the town of Cairo at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

The saloon was a frame building, cheaply and rudely constructed, standing on stilts of timbers that raised it even with the levee, and from that point it was two stories in height.

A false front that covered the gable seemingly added to its size, and it was ornamented with paper of the gayest hues and pattern, and the doors were wide open, revealing an extensive bar and a room that was nearly filled with men.

"All sorts and conditions of men" were there responding to the genial invitation of the man with the diamonds—from East Tennessee emigrants and flatboat hands, to gorgeous steamboat captains and dignified men of business.

And still he stood outside, repeating his invitations to all comers.

This singular proceeding attracted the attention of two young men who were strolling in that direction.

One of them was evidently a Southerner, and probably, to judge by his appearance, the son of a wealthy planter of Mississippi or Louisiana.

His swarthy complexion and dark eyes indicated the Southerner, as well as certain peculiarities in his dress and the tone of his voice.

His companion was a resident of Cairo, who was showing the expectant city to the young Southerner, and expatiating upon its future of promise, rather than upon its present appearance, which was anything but lovely.

"Who is he, Mack?" inquired the young stranger, referring to the man with the diamonds.

"That man? Oh, that is Flush Fred."

"Flush Fred, or Fred Flush? Which is the right name?"

"His right name is Fred Henning, and he is a sporting man—a river gambler, in fact. You see, they make Cairo their head-quarters, now, boarding the boats here, working them on their way down and up the river, and coming back with loads of money and watches and that sort of thing, which they generally deposit in a faro bank, and have to borrow a stake to start them out again. Flush Fred is careful of his money, though, I believe, and is a very decent fellow of his class."

"Perhaps you don't admire the class, Mack."

"I have nothing against them, personally; but they are no credit to the town, and some of us have tried to get rid of them. We have found it easier to talk about than to do."

"Is it because he is usually flush of money that the man there is called Flush Fred?"

"It may be, or because he is fond of betting on flushes. He is a rare hand to bet on flushes, and a rare hand to hold them, too. I remember seeing an instance of it once when I was coming up the river on the Aleck Scott."

"Fred Henning was in a game with three men and all had passed out but himself and one other."

"His opponent thought that he held a masterful hand, and called. There was a big pot on the table, by the way."

"A flush," said Fred.

"Tain't good," said the other man.

"I reckon it is," replied Fred, and he laid down the ten, jack, queen, king and ace of hearts."

"A remarkable hand," said the Southerner.

"Yes, and I don't think he would be likely to play it twice on the same man. But he is a wonderful fellow to bet on a flush."

"He seems to be flush of money to-day, and very liberal, as well. I would like to know the cause of the excitement."

Fred Henning explained it as he continued to press his invitations on the passing public.

"Walk in, my friends! Step up, gentlemen! Set 'em out lively, Jimmy! It's my treat to-day, boys, because this is my birthday. Twenty-six years old this day, and sound as a dollar and as lively as a cricket."

"Let's go in, Mack," remarked the Southerner.

"Walk in, my friends," said Fred Henning, as he noticed their hesitation. "All are welcome, the rich as well as the poor. I can't drink with every man, and keep a head on me, but will join you with pleasure. After you have paid your respects to the bar you will find a nice lunch up-stairs—as good a spread as old man Peck can make—and if you want to try your luck at a square game of faro, you will find Johnny Hurtt up there ready to accommodate you, and he won't hurt you. I can vouch for him as a perfect gentleman. Hurtt is his name, but there's no harm in his nature."

"You had better be careful, Arthur Helmsley," said the young Southerner's companion. "It is safe to let the games alone."

"Don't worry about me, Mack. I know how to take care of myself."

While the two young men were in the bar-room, Fred Henning was spoken to by a man who came in with a paper and pencil in his hand.

"What's this?" demanded Flush Fred. "Another church? Going to build another church, hey? Want the boys to chip in? Of course they will. What is it this time? Baptist? That's all right. I believe in them all. They're all good, and you can't have too much of a good thing. What this town needs more than anything else just now is a Baptist church. Give me the paper."

He signed his name with a flourish, and dived into his pocket for a roll of bills.

"Here's the cash—best I can do just now. Go up-stairs, and Johnny Hurtt will come down heavy if he is in luck."

Arthur Helmsley was moved to add a donation, and several others followed suit.

"That's right," said Flush Fred. "I believe in encouraging all deserving objects. By the way, I wonder why the people here don't encourage their newspaper. I can't imagine how those fellows manage to grub along and make a paper on nothing, and put brains in it, too. We sporting men would chip in and help them if they would give us anything like a fair show; but they are so dead down on us that we can't touch them. Why won't they leave us alone, as the preachers do?"

"That means you, Mack," said Helmsley, with a laugh. "Here is one of the paper men, Mr. Henning."

"I know him, and am glad to see him here. I wish he would take my words to heart, but don't suppose he will. I hope, gentlemen, that you will both join me in a birthday glass."

"Many happy returns of the day," said the Southerner, as he complied with this request.

"Yes, this is my birthday," said Fred Henning, as he set down his glass. "I don't know that I have any particular cause to be proud of it; but I am glad of it. That I have lived to see this day, after all the chances I have taken against it, is something to be glad of, and I am right glad that I am in the land of the living and that the devil hasn't coppered me. Just now I am sure that I would not have as much as a cross look to give even to my most deadly enemy—And there he is, as sure as I'm a sinner!"

A sudden change came over the look and manner of Fred Henning.

His eyes stared straight before him, and his face grew pale, while its muscles were visibly drawn and tightened.

Arthur Helmsley and his friend looked in the direction at which the gambler was staring, and saw a man standing in the doorway.

He was evidently a new-comer on the scene, and was as evidently the man of whom Henning had spoken, and who had caused the change to come over him.

He was a tall man, of middle age, with a heavy black beard, and well dressed, though not with any pretense to style.

He had stopped in the doorway, and as he stood there, his hand was in the breast of his frock coat, and a wicked, malicious sneer could be seen curling under his heavy mustache.

"Who is he?" asked Arthur Helmsley.

"A man who lost money to me once," replied Fred Henning. "He swore that he would kill me some time, and since then he has been on my track. You had better get out of the way."

Helmsley did get out of the way, but moved slowly toward the door, as if the glaring eyes

of the stranger fascinated him and drew him thither.

"Now I've got you, you swindling scoundrel!" exclaimed the man in the doorway. "This is your birthday, you say, and it is the last you will ever see."

Flush Fred was very pale, but neither stirred nor trembled.

"I have no weapon, John Munford," he said. "Would you take an advantage of an unarmed man?"

"I would take any advantage of a snake or a wolf, and I mean to kill you where you stand."

There was no person near the tall stranger when he spoke these words, nor was there any person between him and his intended victim.

No one spoke or moved.

Every one in the bar-room seemed to be stupefied by the spell that he had cast upon the place.

He had drawn a revolver from his breast, and had cocked and leveled it.

Before his finger could press the trigger, Arthur Helmsley sprung forward with one long and swift leap, striking upward the pistol, and at the same time snatching it from the stranger's grasp.

It was discharged, but the bullet sped away harmlessly.

The stranger was so astonished by this sudden action that he made no effort until he saw himself confronted by his own weapon, and then it was too late to make an effort.

"You had better go away from here," said the Southerner.

He turned and walked away, and nobody tried to hinder or to follow him.

CHAPTER II.

A LIVELY GAME.

THE fine steamer Pacific, on her trip from Louisville to New Orleans, was steaming down the Mississippi.

She was a splendid craft, the best work of the famous New Albany builders, well officered and well provided, in all respects entitled to be called a floating palace, a worthy successor of the Eclipse and the Shotwell.

The table that was set three times a day in the long saloon-cabin fully equaled that of the best hotels; the ladies' cabin at the stern was a marvel of luxury; and the Social Hall—as the space forward was styled, that included the bar and the clerk's office—was spacious and attractive.

It was night, and the Social Hall was thronged by the men passengers, a motley collection of male humanity, but all orderly and apparently respectable.

There was also a democratic equality among them all, such as could be seen nowhere else except in the mining regions of the West, where all ranks were leveled by circumstances.

On the Mississippi steamer there were no leveling circumstances outside of those caused by contact during the voyage; yet the poor working-man was as much at home as the wealthy planter or merchant, and could speak to either of them with the assurance of receiving a polite reply.

The professional gambler, though shunned by some who feared the tricks of his trade, was not looked down on, and was likely to be on familiar terms with the judge who might at some time be compelled to enforce the law against him.

The handsome bar of the Pacific was largely patronized, and at several tables, both in the Social Hall and the end of the saloon that adjoined it, games of cards were in progress.

Only one of the games was for pastime merely; on two of the others rounds of drinks were depending; but at the rest the notes and gold and silver on the table represented a more absorbing interest.

It would have been impossible, except for one who was extensively acquainted, to decide which was the professional, and which the amateur gamblers.

There were in the West and South plenty of merchants, planters, professional men, and traveling people generally, who boasted of being able to play as well as the best, and claimed to know all the tricks and ins and outs of the games they played.

Such as these were always willing to pit themselves against the regular gamblers, and often sought their society for the purpose of finding "foemen worthy of their steel."

In fact, there were so many well-to-do and respectable citizens who traveled merely for the sake of playing, that the line between professionals and amateurs was none too strictly drawn.

Among those who assuredly represented the professionals in the Social Hall of the Pacific, was Fred Henning.

He was as bright and cheery as ever; but there was a bit of an anxious look in his face.

He was not playing, but was watching a table.

At the table which he was watching three men were seated, and the game was poker.

One of the men Flush Fred knew to be a skillful amateur, another he was well acquainted with as a professional, and the third was Arthur Helmsley.

Fred Henning remembered young Helmsley well enough, but had not spoken to him, as the young gentleman did not seem to recognize him, and showed no disposition to cultivate his acquaintance.

The luck appeared to be entirely on the side of the skillful amateur.

Helmsley had lost several pots, and the professional, although the stakes were not high, was in time cleaned out, having gone into the game with insufficient capital.

When the latter had reached this condition of insolvency, he rose from the table, and appealed to Flush Fred for a loan.

"Lend me fifty," he said, "and you'll see me clean those chaps out and get a pile of the young fellow's money."

"I would rather take your place in the game," answered Fred. "Let me in there, and I will stake you to the top of my pile for anything else. I have a particular reason for wanting to take a hand in that game."

His friend consented, and he took his seat at the table without any objection from the other two.

"I understand that you want some fresh capital here," he said, "and I have a little pile which you are welcome to if you can win it."

"Glad to see you," replied the gentleman who may be described as the amateur. "We will make it half-a-dollar ante, and no limit, if you choose."

Flush Fred did choose, and he called for a new deck of cards, and the luck changed amazingly.

Arthur Helmsley won nearly as often as he lost; but the amateur's money passed pretty rapidly into Flush Fred's possession.

It was not because he held such remarkably good cards that he won, but because his hands were generally a little better than those of his opponents.

After one of Henning's deals the amateur passed out, throwing down his cards, and vowed that he would rather be kicked than attempt to do anything with such hands.

Young Helmsley staid in, as he held three queens, which was better than any hand since Fred had entered the game, and he hoped that he might "fill."

He did better than that.

In the draw, he got another queen, and the betting between him and Henning grew fast and furious.

The gambler knew all the arts by which an unwary opponent might be induced to increase the size of the pot, and the young Southerner became as excited and unreasonable as a woman at an auction.

At last Helmsley threw down five \$100 notes, and it was evident that he had reached the limit of his cash.

"I call you!" he exclaimed in a voice that was hoarse and unnatural.

"Four kings," quietly replied Henning, as he showed his hand.

The other dropped his cards on the table.

"I might have known it," he said, as he rose from his chair.

"It's all in the draw," remarked Fred.

"Yes, there is a great deal in the draw. You have got all my money, and that ends it."

The exciting game and the high stakes had attracted many spectators, who looked curiously at Arthur Helmsley as he passed through them and went out into the air.

Flush Fred also looked after him, but only for a moment.

Then he gathered up his winnings, put them in his pocket, excused himself to the amateur, and left the table.

He sauntered about the Social Hall for a few moments, apparently with no purpose in view, and then quietly slipped outside through one of the forward doors of the cabin.

But he did have a purpose in view.

It was evident from the quick and anxious glances he cast about him that he was looking for some one.

Quite as evident that he did not see the person he was looking for.

He looked around the passage on each side of the cabin, but did not find him there.

"Perhaps he has gone to his room," he muttered, and returned to the cabin and the clerk's office.

"Which is Mr. Helmsley's state-room?" he asked.

The clerk glanced at the book, and gave him the number.

He went to the room that was indicated, and knocked, but got no reply.

He opened the door and looked in, but no person was there.

Again he went outside.

"He wouldn't be likely to go below," he muttered again, as he ascended the stairs that led to the upper deck.

The hurricane deck was deserted.

The night was intensely dark, and there was no attraction there, except for one who desired no company but his own.

It was almost impossible to distinguish the shores of the river from the darkly flowing stream, and the only signs of life were the lights in the lofty pilot-house, the churning of the big wheels, and the hoarse puffing of the steam from the escape pipes.

Fred Henning looked anxiously about, but still failed to discover the object of his search.

One of the pilots, whose watch was off, came down the steps, as if from the clouds.

"Seen anybody come up here lately, Sam?" inquired Henning, knowing that the man to whom he spoke could see in the darkness like a cat.

"Yes; a young man came up here a bit ago. Hope you're not hunting a fight."

"Not a bit of it. Which way did he go?"

"I think he went aft, around the Texas."

Fred Henning went aft, stepping softly as he approached the end of that upper cabin of the officers.

Just around the Texas, and with his back close to the paneling, stood Arthur Helmsley.

He was concealed from the view of any but a close observer, and in his right hand he held something that shone in the darkness.

It was a silver-plated revolver, and he was evidently examining it.

There was a sharp click as he closed down the hammer when he heard footsteps, and he was about to conceal the weapon when Fred Henning's hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" demanded Helmsley.

"I am a friend of yours, Mr. Helmsley," answered Fred. "The man whose life you saved in Cairo."

"Whose life I saved?"

"Yes, on my birthday, when John Munford had me covered with his revolver."

"Oh, that was nothing. You are Flush Fred, then? I thought I recognized you when we were playing down below, and you won all my money."

"The same man. What are you doing with that pistol?"

"Merely looking at it."

"Yes, I know how men sometimes look at pistols when they have lost all their money, and that is why I came up here. I want you to understand, Mr. Helmsley, that I did not win your money, but kept it for you. I went into the game to save you from that other man, who would cheat the eye-teeth out of you, though he claims to be no gambler."

"I don't understand this," said Arthur.

"It is plain enough. Do you suppose I would rob a man who had saved my life, or permit him to be robbed? I have saved your money for you, and, if you will step down to my state room with me, I will account to you for every dollar of it."

"I can't allow that, Mr. Henning. It was a fair game."

"It was not a fair game. It was a cheating game on the part of everybody but you. And here I must say something that I want to stick to you. Keep clear of me and all my tribe, and that means that you had better keep clear of playing cards for money, as you can't tell where you may find us. We can win your money always, and the amount we win depends only upon how much we are willing to take. Tonight I stacked the cards every time, and that other man knew it, and was mad because he couldn't beat me at doing it. I wanted to save your money from him, though I supposed that you could easily spare it."

"The truth is that I could not spare it," answered the young man. "The money was not mine. It was intrusted to me for a special purpose, and I gambled it away. What a shame it is to have to confess such a thing!"

"All the more lucky that I saved it for you then. Come down below, Mr. Helmsley, and let me turn it over to you."

"It is too much to accept. You must let me pay it back to you when I can."

"All right. Anything to please you, if you will take my advice and leave gambling to those who understand it. I want you to consider me as a friend, Mr. Helmsley. I ain't much to be proud of in the way of a friend, but I may be useful to you some day."

CHAPTER III.

THE TENNESSEE AVENGERS.

THE Cincinnati and Memphis packets were not the biggest boats on the river, and were too short and "chunky" in their build to be considered handsome.

The aristocrats of the New Orleans steamers, and even of the St. Louis packets, looked down upon them, and made invidious references to fried meat and pork and beans.

Yet they were popular boats, and did a thriving business in passengers and freight.

Flush Fred Henning, although one of the high-toned sporting men of the Mississippi, on one occasion took passage on a Cincinnati packet from Memphis, because he wanted to get to Cairo, and it happened to be the only craft available.

He had no idea of "working" the boat; but it was only a little while after leaving Memphis that he became engaged in a game.

Among the passengers there chanced to be a Tennessee planter, Colonel Fowle by name—a gentleman somewhat more than middle aged, tall, dignified, and a little inclined to be pompous.

He was a skillful amateur, of the class that has been mentioned herein, and specially prided himself upon his poker playing.

As Fred Henning was well dressed, and of a gentlemanly manner and appearance, Colonel Fowle pitched upon him as a congenial companion, and struck up a conversation with him which Fred regarded as more tedious than interesting.

He made this *compagnon du voyage* a confidant of his intentions in taking the trip.

"I have sold my last bale of cotton, sir, to those Memphis men," said Colonel Fowle. "They get all the profits, sir, and I have to support all the niggers, sir, and pay all the expenses. I am now going to Cincinnati, to make my arrangements for shipping my crop direct to the East, sir, and then I hope there may be some money for me in cotton, as well as for the deuced middleman. What do you say to that, sir?"

"I think you are doing a good thing for yourself," answered Fred; "but I hope you will do better than that hereafter. I hope the time will come, and that before long, when the South will work up her own cotton in her own mills, and that will be a great gain all around."

"You are right, sir!" exclaimed Colonel Fowle. "The most sensible man I have met in a long time, sir. But we can't work up the cotton while we have the niggers, and we must have the niggers to make the cotton. I confess that I don't see my way clear through it all."

"A way will be opened for you in time, sir."

"But I cannot wait for time, and so I must go to Cincinnati to sell my cotton. This is dry talking, Mr.—ah—"

"Henning," suggested Fred.

"Very dry talking, sir, and I wish you would take a drink with me, to moisten it up a bit."

Flush Fred consented, and the liquors were speedily absorbed—the more speedily, perhaps, because their quality was not remarkably good.

"I would like to have a quiet game of cards to pass the time," remarked Colonel Fowle.

"Do you play, Mr. Henning?"

"I know a few games," answered Fred.

"Poker, for instance?"

"Yes, I can play poker."

"Suppose we try a game?"

"I have no objection. Are you sure that you understand poker, colonel?"

"Well, sir, I am sure I ought to. It is my favorite game. I have a sort of passion for it. Yes, sir, I do understand poker, and claim to play a good game. I am afraid that I will be too much for you, Mr. Henning; but we will put the limit low, just enough to make the game interesting."

"I am not likely to lose any more than I can afford to," replied Fred, and the cards were procured, and they sat down in the Social Hall to play.

The game had not progressed far when three things became manifest.

By the mutual consent of the players the limit with which they had started was enlarged, and finally abandoned.

In the second place, Fred Henning soon discovered that his opponent was not only a good poker-player, but was an adept in the arts of manipulating the cards.

As soon as he perceived that Fred was a good player, he "went in to win," and proceeded to "put up hands" when he had the deal in a manner that surprised even Fred Henning, who saw that there was no use in standing on ceremony with such an artist, and naturally concluded that it would be only right and proper to beat him at his own game.

In the third place, it was manifest that the bystanders, most of whom were Tennesseans, were strongly in sympathy with Colonel Fowle.

They showed an unusual amount of interest and inquisitiveness, overlooking Fred Henning's hand, and making suggestions concerning the play.

He had no doubt that they would, if they could, convey such information to his opponent as would enable him to win.

It was both difficult and disagreeable to play against the crowd as well as against a skillful and unscrupulous opponent; but Flush Fred was an old hand and a cool one, and he was able to baffle the curiosity of the bystanders by concealing his cards and the style of his play.

The game progressed with varying fortunes, no heavy bets being on the board at any time, until at one of Fred Henning's deals, during the temporary absence of most of the bystanders on a visit to the bar, he was able to arrange the cards just as he wanted them.

When Colonel Fowle looked at his hand his eyes sparkled, and he began to raise the pot.

Henning joined him in this, and before the draw the stakes were worth coveting.

Colonel Fowle called for two cards, and his opponent took two, and the betting became fast and furious.

The bystanders had returned from the bar, and were taking a lively interest in the game; but Flush Fred did not allow them to get a look at his cards.

As he knew exactly what his adversary held, having selected his cards for him, the only question was of the amount to which he could raise the pot.

The Tennessean was confident, and kept putting up his money, until Henning, believing that he had gone far enough, made a "call."

"The money is mine!" triumphantly exclaimed Colonel Fowle, as he showed an almost invincible hand.

"I reckon not," replied Fred. "I have a flush."

"What is a flush worth?" demanded the other.

"Mine is a straight flush," answered Fred, as he laid down the ten, jack, queen, king, and ace of hearts.

Colonel Fowle was terribly enraged. His face was flaming red, and his wrath fairly boiled over.

"You are a swindler!" he shouted, as he brought his fist down on the table with a savage thump.

This was unquestionably true; but Flush Fred knew that he had not done in that line anything more than his adversary had done or attempted to do.

He had merely outswindled him. Therefore he was bold in his own defense.

"You are a liar!" he promptly replied.

"No man shall call me that and live!" exclaimed Colonel Fowle, as he drew a revolver.

Fred Henning had expected this, and was prepared for it.

He was quicker than his opponent with his pistol, and, before the latter could bring his weapon to bear, Fred fired his self-cocker.

The ball struck the Tennessean in the forehead, and he fell from his chair to the floor, his own shot passing harmlessly through the hurricane roof.

The bystanders had not been able to prevent this murderous result.

Indeed, they had not attempted to do so, doubtless believing that their friend would easily make an end of his antagonist.

As soon as they recovered from their astonishment at the unexpected termination of the affair, they rushed upon Fred Henning, who was quietly sweeping the money from the table into his pocket.

He forced himself to his feet in spite of them, though he could not throw off the grasp with which they had seized him.

"What does this mean?" he angrily demanded.

"Kill him!" shouted some.

"Hang him!" cried others.

"You are a murderer!" exclaimed his accusers.

"How am I a murderer?" replied Fred.

"You have murdered Colonel Fowle, as good and square a man as ever lived."

"It was no murder. It was all fair. He drew a pistol on me, and I had to defend myself."

"You called him a liar."

"He called me a swindler."

"And you were a swindler. You put up a hand on him."

"He had been doing the same to me all along," insisted Fred. "I only beat him at his own game, as I had a right to do."

Fred Henning clearly had the best of the argument; but the crowd had the numbers, and their brute force overpowered him.

The Tennesseans were bent on avenging the death of Colonel Fowle, with whom most of them were well acquainted, and some insisted on blowing out the brains of his murderer then and there.

"But the captain came forward, and besought them not to shed any more blood on his boat.

His entreaties had the effect of partially quelling the excitement, but only to the extent that the idea of hanging prevailed over that of shooting.

During this discussion, which was stormy but brief, a few were thoughtful enough to pick up the body of Colonel Fowle, and carry it to his state-room, which was in the after part of the cabin.

The opinion in favor of hanging the culprit instantaneously became so nearly unanimous that the captain was at first urged, and then ordered, to put the boat ashore, that the summary execution might be proceeded with at once.

He suggested, somewhat feebly, that the proper course would be to land the man at the nearest town, and turn him over to the authorities.

But his weak words were overborne by the pressure of the crowd.

"He won't never get no justice that way," said one of them.

"He is a river gambler, who has been in such scrapes before, and knows how to work out of them," said another.

"Where would the witnesses be when his trial came off?" demand a third.

The pressure was so strong that the captain was compelled to give orders that the boat should at once make a landing at the Tennessee shore.

Fred Henning had kept quiet while his fate was under consideration.

It was clearly useless for him to attempt to change the purpose of the Tennessee avengers, and during their wordy racket he was the coolest and calmest person in the cabin.

It was true that he had been in scrapes before, but never in one that was exactly similar to this one, whose danger he recognized, though he showed no fear or anxiety.

When the decisive action was taken of turning the boat's head toward the shore, he made up his mind to the worst, and determined to meet his fate like a man.

His hands were tied and a rope was procured, in which a noose was knotted, and he was led down forward to the boiler-deck, followed and surrounded by the men who were intent upon putting him to death.

He had asked only one favor of them—that his hat might be placed on his head—and this they had granted.

The river was then at a good stage, so there was no steep and muddy bank to climb, and when the landing was made the boat's nose was nearly level with the forest-covered shore.

No line was taken to the bank, and only a narrow gang-plank was run out.

One of the most eager of the Tennesseans hurried ashore over the plank, leading Flush Fred by the rope, the noose being around his neck.

As they reached the shore the leader grasped Fred by the collar of his coat, and shouted to those who remained on the boat.

"Come on, men! Come and finish this job quick!"

They did not come.

Something happened just then that interfered with their designs upon the prisoner.

There was a sudden and loud report on the steamer, followed by the rush of escaping steam.

The wheels ceased to revolve, and the boat, no longer held to the bank by their action, began to drift down-stream and away from the shore.

The leader, who was on the bank, ran and jumped aboard before the boat got out of reach.

Fred Henning did not follow his example.

CHAPTER IV.

A DEAD MAN'S DAUGHTER.

FLUSH FRED found himself alone on the bank of the river, and never had solitude been more welcome to him.

He gazed at the crippled steamer as it floated out into the stream, and felt that he had happily escaped a great peril.

Cool and calm at that moment as he had been throughout the entire difficulty, he had no difficulty in estimating the extent of the steamboat's trouble.

A cylinder-head had been blown out, and she was disabled, but in no danger of being destroyed.

She could proceed on her voyage, going slowly on one wheel, or could work her way back to the bank where the prisoner had been left.

If the latter course should be decided on, Fred Henning was of the opinion that he would not be very easy to find.

But he had no fear of that.

The captain would find in the crippled condition of the boat a good excuse for refusing to land again, and of course it could not be expected that he would let the boat remain there while his passengers undertook the pursuit of the fugitive.

To strengthen the captain in this supposed course of reasoning, Flush Fred got out of view, so that he might be presumed to have run away.

But he did not lose sight of the steamer, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing her turn with one wheel and paddle down the river.

As she was not far from Memphis, it was doubtless her captain's intention to return to that city for repairs.

Fred Henning was overjoyed at finding himself alive and free, and the only question was what use he should make of his freedom.

He was not entirely free, as his hands were tied behind his back; but he did not doubt that he would soon be able, in one way or another, to get rid of that difficulty.

As he jerked and moved his tethered wrists, he fortunately discovered that the handkerchief with which they were tied had been insecurely knotted, and after a little effort he pulled loose from it.

He looked at the handkerchief, which was none too clean, and threw it away with an expression of disgust.

The rope, with which he might have been hanged, still dangled from his neck.

He removed the noose, and could not help shuddering slightly as he did so, but smiled grimly as he threw it from the bank far into the river.

"I really don't think that I will need that necktie again," he said.

He felt in his pockets, and found them abundantly supplied with money.

The Tennessee Avengers, in their eagerness to strangle their victim, had neglected to deprive him of his cash, and had even left him his revolver.

He was free, healthy, well-dressed, in funds, and armed.

To a man in that condition life presented no very perplexing problems, although he had lately killed a fellow-being.

The world was before him, and he had but to choose the course that he would take.

He could not get to Cairo as he had expected to, but could go into the interior, reach a town, and find a conveyance in some direction.

So he turned his back on the river, and walked through the forest until he came to a country road.

This road he followed toward the south, his knowledge of the geography of the region telling him that he would be likely to find the nearest settlement in that direction.

He was getting weary of walking when the hour of dusk arrived, and had not yet come in sight of even an open field.

It was probable, however, that he was approaching the end of the forest, or at least a break in it, as there was light ahead, and soon he heard voices a little way beyond him.

The persons who were speaking were in a little lane that ran into the main road, and it was not until he had almost reached them that he discovered that they were a man and a woman.

That is to say, one of them was a girl, and a very pretty one at that, and the other was a passably well-dressed young man, who could not be called handsome, and who seemed to be then decidedly in a bad temper.

The first words that Flush Fred plainly distinguished were those of the girl.

"Leave me alone, Press Munford! I tell you that I won't have anything to do with you, and that settles it."

"It don't settle it," angrily replied the other. "You have got to have something to do with me. Your father is on my side, and you may as well give in first as last."

"I will not give in. You are lying when you say that my father is on your side. I hate and despise you, and will have nothing to do with you."

"We will see about that, my girl. I have got you now where I want you."

He seized her roughly, and she screamed.

Neither of them had noticed the rapid advance of Fred Henning, who came up behind the young man, seized him by the coat collar, and jerked him back.

"You had better pass out and quit that game," remarked the jerker.

The young man's face flushed a fiery red, and by way of reply he turned upon Flush Fred, and flew at him wildly.

But the man from the river met him with a straight out blow between the eyes, which laid him sprawling upon the ground.

He struggled to his feet, and put his hand behind him, as if to draw a pistol.

"None of that!" exclaimed Henning, who instantly had him covered with his self-cocker.

"Give me that pistol!" ordered Fred, and it was reluctantly handed up to him, under pressure of the self-cocker.

"Make yourself scarce!" was Fred's first command. "Clear out, I say, and be thankful that you have got off so easy."

"This will be settled at another time," said the girl's assailant. "What is your name, and where will I find you?"

"Go along! You are not talking to a fool!"

The young man walked away sneakingly and Fred Henning turned to the girl.

"I am glad that I happened along in time to bother that brute," said he.

"I am very thankful to you," she answered. "You have done me a great service, greater than I can tell."

"Very lucky for me that I had the chance. I think, now, that I had better accompany you as far as your home. Which way are you going?"

"Only a little distance down the road, and I will be very glad to have your company."

Fred was more than glad to accompany her, as, in addition to her society, he saw a chance of getting supper and a shelter for the night which was fast approaching.

After passing fields of cotton and corn they came to a large farm-house with negro cabins clustered near it, where they were noisily greeted by several dogs.

The young lady silenced the dogs, and easily prevailed upon Fred to enter the house.

"My mother will want to thank you," she said, "and she will be very glad to see you, Mr.—I believe you have not mentioned your name."

"Henning is my name—Fred Henning."

"I will never forget it, sir. You are a stranger in these parts, I suppose."

"Not quite a stranger, though not a resident. I am a traveling man, stopping at Grundy just now, and have been tramping about to look over the prospects of the cotton-crop."

"You are several miles from Grundy now, sir, and for that reason you had better make yourself at home here for a while."

Fred Henning was glad to do so, and in the

house was warmly welcomed by the young lady's mother, to whom her daughter told the story of her recent adventure.

She introduced herself as Mrs. Fowle, and her daughter as Ella Fowle.

The name struck the man from the river rather strangely and a little disagreeably, in consequence of that tragic adventure of his own; but he reflected that it was not an uncommon name, and did not suffer the coincidence to trouble him.

"You will have to make up your mind to stay here to-night, Mr. Henning," said the old lady. "We will be very glad to accommodate you, and in the morning will send you to Grundy in a buggy."

This was highly satisfactory to Fred, and he was particularly well pleased when an excellent and abundant supper was placed on the table.

He did ample justice to the repast, and entertained the ladies so well with his conversation, which was always bright and interesting, that they could not help considering him a charming companion.

For his part he considered himself in clover.

The contrast between his present position and that of a few hours ago was striking and delightful.

He was willing to enjoy the society of the two ladies as long as they chose to sit up.

With Ella Fowle he was specially fascinated, and already pictured out a pleasing romance, in which he and she figured as hero and heroine.

She was doubtless the only child of her mother, who was probably a widow, as there was no man about the place.

To be sure, he thought he had heard the fellow from whom he rescued her say something about her father; but that must have been a mistake, as no such person was visible.

If she had a father, that need not spoil the romance.

Why should not he, who felt himself falling in love with her, make good his footing in that house, lay siege to her, marry her, and ultimately become the possessor of a fine plantation?

This bright dream was soon rudely shattered.

When the hour of bed-time arrived a negro-servant was called in with a candle to show the guest to his room.

"My daughter and I are under great obligations to you, Mr. Henning," said Mrs. Fowle, "not only for the service you rendered to Ella, but for the pleasure of your society. If Colonel Fowle were here, he would be glad to thank you, and would do anything in his power to make your stay with us agreeable to you."

Fred Henning was sadly taken aback.

There was a husband, then, and he was known as Colonel Fowle.

Was it the same Colonel Fowle whom he had so recently killed?

That question must be settled.

"Is Colonel Fowle away from home?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. He has gone to Cincinnati, on one of the packets from Memphis, to make arrangements for the sale of his cotton."

It was the same Colonel Fowle. There could no longer be any doubt of that.

There was another coincidence that ought to be inquired into.

"What was the name, Miss Ella," he asked, "of that young fellow who was troubling you when I came up?"

"Pressley Munford, the son of a neighbor of ours, but not a near neighbor."

"What is his father's name?"

"John Munford. Are you acquainted with the family?"

"I have had some dealings with a man named Munford; but it was probably not the same man. Good-night, ladies, and pleasant dreams to you both."

CHAPTER V.

FLUSH FRED'S REMORSE.

WHEN Fred Henning found himself alone in the pleasant room that had been allotted to him, his reflections were anything but agreeable.

"This is a way of being thrown among acquaintances that don't suit me a bit," he said to himself.

"The daughter of the man I killed, and the son of the man who wants to kill me!"

"It is too much."

"I don't worry about the Munford tribe; but to think that I have robbed that girl of her father is enough to make me put my pistol to my head and blow my miserable brains out."

He sat down, and leaned his head on his hand, having not the slightest inclination toward sleep.

It was, indeed, a peculiar and painful position in which he was placed.

He had entered that hospitable home, though unwittingly, under false pretenses.

He had been treated as a friend by the mother and daughter of the man he killed, and had felt himself for a time to be almost one of the family.

What would they think of him when they should find out who he was and what he had done?

Of course they would find it out, and that right soon.

Ella Fowle had assured him that she would never forget his name, and she would have good cause to remember it.

When the story of her father's death should be told her, how easily she would recognize the name of his murderer, and how intensely she would hate his memory!

It was no wonder that these terrible reflections kept Fred Henning from sleep, and that he tossed about restlessly after he sought his bed, full of grief and remorse, wishing that he had never entered that house, and that he could steal away without the knowledge of its inmates.

He could not attempt to do that, as he knew that the dogs would inevitably give the alarm.

At last, wishing himself a thousand miles away, he found in sleep a refuge from his thoughts.

When he went down-stairs in the morning Mrs. Fowle and Ella were up, and they remarked his pale and worn appearance, fearing that he had had a bad night, and sympathizing with him to an extent that was painful.

"It is true that I have not slept well," he replied. "I had bad dreams, and allowed some business matters to worry me. I must get away as soon as possible."

"Surely not before breakfast!" exclaimed the old lady.

Of course he must stay to breakfast, and he did so, but was quite ill at ease, and there was nothing left of the flow of spirits and the sprightly conversation that had made him so entertaining the night before.

When breakfast was over a buggy was at the door, with a negro to drive, and Mrs. Fowle and her daughter bade him a farewell that was almost affectionate.

"You must come and visit us whenever you are in this neighborhood," said the matron. "I want you to make our house your home, and am anxious that you should meet Colonel Fowle."

This was the last blow and the worst. He knew that neither he nor they would ever meet Colonel Fowle in this world, and the cheerful manner in which they spoke of the dead man cut him to the heart.

He concealed his feelings as well as he could, and was glad when he got out of sight of the Fowle plantation.

He directed the negro to drive him to the nearest railroad station, and there he took the first train for Memphis.

Before he reached the station he had settled in his mind what he would do.

The crippled steamer had returned to Memphis.

She had carried thither the body of Colonel Fowle, the avenging Tennessean, and all the witnesses of the fatal affray.

He would go there and confront them, and demand a trial.

An acquittal or a sentence would remove a great weight from his mind.

The killing of Colonel Fowle had not worried him, but had been regarded merely as an unfortunate and unpleasant episode, until he accepted the hospitality of Mrs. Fowle and her daughter.

Then it began to trouble him intolerably.

He knew that he had acted in self-defense, and believed that he was not guilty in law; yet he could not help feeling that he was the murderer of Colonel Fowle, and that he ought to pay the penalty of his crime.

By the time he reached Memphis he had partially changed his plan, having come to the conclusion that he had better look around and see how the land lay, before giving himself up.

One of the first men he met after he got off the cars was a prominent member of the sporting fraternity, George Dace by name, whose face at once became expressive of the deepest sympathy and concern.

"Come with me, Fred," said Dace. "I am very glad and very sorry to see you here."

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Fred.

"I mean that I am glad to see you, but sorry to see you here. You ought not to have come to Memphis, Fred."

"Why so?"

"Because there is the very devil to pay about that man you killed on the Cincinnati packet. He has lots of friends here, and they are looking for you high and low, and swear that they mean to get you, dead or alive."

"They would have got me dead, if it hadn't been for an accident. That is why I'm here, George. I want to give myself up and stand my trial."

"Don't think of such a thing, my boy. You have friends here, as you know, who will do all they can for you, and for their sake you mustn't throw yourself away. Come to my room, where you will be quiet and out of the way, and stay there until some of us can

scout around and see what your chance is for a fair show. Just now things look pretty blue for you."

"I don't know but you are right," replied Fred, "and I will take your advice. In fact, I had about made up my mind to something of the sort before I saw you."

George Dace's room was quiet and retired enough, and Fred Henning was assured that he might remain there in entire safety, having his meals brought to him, until it should be considered proper for him to go out.

"Now that I have got you settled here," said Dace, "I will go and find out what the dead man's friends are doing. You know that you can rely on what I tell you, and I hope that you will have sense enough to be guided by your best friends."

Within two hours George Dace returned, and with him were three other knights of the spotted pasteboards, who condoled with Flush Fred, and urged him to keep quiet for a while.

"The business is worse than I had supposed," said Dace. "A warrant is out, and the sheriff is looking for you; but that is not the worst. The feeling against you is very strong, and it won't be safe for you to venture out until it gets quieted down."

These statements were confirmed by the others, who united in giving the unfortunate man the same advice.

They kindly consented to the ordering of wine and cigars, for which Fred Henning, in consideration of their sympathy, was expected to pay, and for which he did pay.

"One thing looks queer to me," he remarked. "The shooting was not in Shelby county, and I don't see how they could get out a warrant here."

"It was on the river," suggested George Dace.

"Yes; but I know something about the law. It was near the Tennessee shore, and within the jurisdiction of the county we landed at."

"Perhaps it is the sheriff of that county who has brought the warrant here."

"I don't see how they could get hold of him so soon," insisted Fred.

"There is the telegraph, you know."

George Dace left the room with his three friends, saying that they would go and make further inquiries.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRESH SURPRISE.

THE prisoner in the custody of his friends was not satisfied.

When his Job's comforters had left him his uneasiness increased, and he was ready to do something desperate.

He did not blame them for the advice they gave him, but was not disposed to take that advice.

They had not seen the daughter of the man he murdered, and could not appreciate the considerations that had brought him to Memphis, and nothing they had said or might say could lessen the weight of those considerations.

He had not come there to hide from the law, but to shoulder his responsibilities and face his accusers like a man.

This determination came to him with renewed force when George Dace had left him for the second time, and he was not long in making up his mind to go out to find the Sheriff of Shelby county, with whom he was personally well acquainted, and to surrender himself into the custody of that official.

He had not been locked in. That would have been too strong an exercise of authority for the best of friends.

So he sallied out boldly, and walked down the street.

But he had not got three blocks away when his progress was arrested by another friend.

This was not George Dace or one of his stripe, but a young gentleman whom Fred Henning was very glad to see.

It was Arthur Helmsley, who was rejoiced at meeting Fred, and greeted him most cordially.

"The very man I was wishing to see," said Arthur. "Let us go somewhere and have a quiet talk."

This suited Fred, who, although he had determined to give himself up, would naturally prefer not to be apprehended or assaulted on the street.

He led his friend to a private room in a restaurant, where Arthur ordered a light lunch with wine, and they were as retired and cozy as a couple of mice in the middle of a cheese.

"You say that you are my friend, and I meet you as a friend," Arthur began. "I shall want to ask your advice after I have settled a little business with you, and the business is to pay you the money you advanced to me on the Pacific."

"Don't let us start out with any nonsense," answered Fred. "You don't owe me any money."

"I think I do."

"Keep on thinking so, if you want to be hard-headed; but let that debt run on until I need money, and perhaps," he observed a little sadly, "I may need some before long. Just now I have as much as I can take care of."

"I wish you would take it," insisted Arthur.

"But I won't you see, and that point is settled. Do you carry a pistol now, Mr. Helmsley?"

"Why, yes, as nearly everybody does."

"You haven't been tempted to blow your brains out with it, I hope, as you seemed to be when I last met you."

"No, indeed; but I may be tempted again, unless there comes a turn of the tide of my affairs. There was something more than the money difficulty that troubled me then, Mr. Henning."

"Call me, Fred, please—everybody does."

"Something more, Fred, and something worse, though I said nothing about it to you."

"It must have been a pretty solid sort of a trouble, then."

"Very solid. The fact is, I am in love."

"We are all liable, as the darky said when they accused him of stealing an overcoat," remarked Fred very sagely.

"But this is an unusual case. She is the dearest, best, sweetest, loveliest—"

"That'll do," interrupted Fred. "You needn't deal another card. I can call the turn every time. You have put up your whole existence on her, and the only question is whether you have bet to win. Is the angel fond of you?"

"I believe she is—indeed, I am sure of it. She has told me so often enough, and she is the soul of truth."

"What is the trouble, then?"

"The trouble is with her father," sadly answered Arthur. "He is bitterly opposed to me, and swears that his daughter shall never marry me. Her family and mine are at odds. There has been bad blood between them for many years, and some bloodshed, too. She and I would be glad to heal the breach; but her father keeps up the old feud, and hates everybody who bears the name of Helmsley."

"Girls don't worry much about their fathers nowadays when they make up their minds to marry," suggested Fred.

"But this girl loves her father, and feels herself bound to obey him, no matter how unreasonable he is. She will never marry while he lives without his consent."

"There is no chance, then, except in bringing the old man over, and that looks like a rough deal. Does he play cards?"

"Yes, and he is passionately fond of poker."

"Something might be done in that way, perhaps. Is he a Memphis man?"

"No; he lives on his plantation in Tennessee, not far from Memphis, an' a few miles from the Helmsley place."

"What is the angel's name?" inquired Fred. "Of course, I don't know her; but a name is something to take hold of."

"Her name is Ella Fowle, and her father is Colonel Tom Fowle."

"Ella Fowle!" exclaimed Fred Henning.

He repeated the name so strangely, and with such an air of surprise and consternation, if not of absolute terror, that young Helmsley leaned over and stared at him in amazement.

"What is the matter, Fred?" he demanded.

"Do you know her?"

"I'm not sure but I do. Can you tell me whether her father is at home now?"

"I think he is not. I understood that he was to go to Cincinnati about this time to make arrangements for selling his cotton."

"The same man!" muttered Fred, and his head sunk upon his breast, and he looked the picture of despair.

"What do you mean?" again demanded Arthur. "What do you know about him, or her, or any of them?"

Fred Henning looked up.

This was another trouble that he must meet and face boldly.

"I have fallen in love with that girl myself!" he said.

"You have?"

"Yes; and there is a more serious difficulty in my way than there is in yours."

"What is that?" rather coolly inquired the young man.

"I have killed her father!"

It was then Arthur Helmsley who was forced to show extreme surprise and consternation.

"Killed her father?" he exclaimed, and was all he could say.

"Yes. Hadn't you heard of it?"

"No."

"It is well enough known in Memphis, and I am told that the sheriff is looking for me with a warrant."

"You astonish me, Mr. Henning. I don't know what to say. Have you really killed Colonel Fowle? When and where did you do it? How did it happen?"

Fred told the entire story of the affray on the steamboat, extenuating nothing for himself, and setting down naught in malice against his antagonist.

He then proceeded to tell how he had narrowly escaped hanging, and related all the particulars of his chance meeting with Ella Fowle, and his visit at her home.

"Had y' heard nothing at all of 'hat's-calling scrape?" he asked. "I am told that it has caused great excitement here."

"Nothing at all. I have just got in from

Mississippi, and you are the first man I have spoken to in Memphis."

"I am glad, then, that I was the first to tell you the story, and I have given it to you as straight as a bee-line. You see now, my boy, that you needn't be a bit jealous of me, though the young lady is more than you could paint her, and I would bet my last dollar on her for beauty and sweetness. I was terribly worked up when I learned that it was her father that I had killed; but, between you and me, I don't feel so badly about it now."

"Why not?" asked Henning.

"Because it takes a pretty large-sized straw out of your way. You say that she wouldn't marry you without his consent, and he would never consent while he lived; but he is dead now."

"I hope you don't suppose that I can be glad of his death."

"Of course not; but what I have said is a bit of a consolation to me, and I need something of the sort. Only one thing more I can say, and that is that you must never let her know that you have been a friend of mine, or have even ever spoken to me or seen me. She will hate me bitterly enough, and I don't want her to hate you on my account."

"Please don't talk in that way," entreated Arthur. "The question now is, what shall be done to help you out of your difficulty? You may be sure that I will do everything I can do."

"Don't try to do anything, Helmsley. Your name must not be mixed with mine in this matter."

"I will do my best, whether you want me to or not. I can be as stubborn as you can, if I try. If money is needed, and of course it will be, you shall have every dollar I can raise."

"There is plenty of money. No worry about that."

"What are you thinking of doing, Fred?"

"When I met you I was going to find the sheriff and give myself up."

"Don't do that, I beg you. Wait until we see what shape the business takes."

"I will. My mind has been wavering a good deal, but since I have seen you I have settled on that. Where are you stopping?"

"I'm going to the Gayoso."

"I will call there to see you, or will let you know where you can find me. I think I had better keep a little shady for awhile."

Arthur Helmsley paid the bill, and they separated at the door of the restaurant.

CHAPTER VII.

RAISING THE DEAD.

AUNT CYNTHY was a seeress and a sorceress. She was popularly spoken of in Memphis as a Voodoo queen; but she did not pretend to be even versed in the rites of the Voodoo priestesshood.

She did pretend, and it is likely that her pretension was well-founded, to be a direct descendant of a race of African kings, and to be acquainted with all the mysteries of Obi, including poisons, fetishes, charms, and all manner of witchery.

Since the old negress had settled in Memphis she had gained a large following of believers and clients, and to many of the colored population her name was a wonder and a terror.

There were plenty of white men, also, who believed in her, and among them was Flush Fred.

He was decidedly superstitious, and was not ashamed to confess his weakness in that regard, as it was common to most, if not all of the sporting fraternity.

He was a believer with the rest in lucky days, lucky houses, lucky boats, and all manner of signs and omens that betokened good or bad luck.

In Aunt Cynthy he believed most thoroughly, and had often consulted her concerning his enterprises.

Whether her advice was good or bad, and whether her predictions proved to be true or false, seemed to matter little to Fred. His belief was never shaken, and the old negress continued to be his oracle.

After he left Arthur Helmsley, having settled it in his wavering mind for the present that he would not give himself up, he determined to go and visit Aunt Cynthy, for the purpose of learning from her what his chance was of getting out of his present scrape with safety and honor.

She lived in a hut on the bluff, near the United States reservation, and beyond the region of paved and lighted streets.

There Fred Henning found her, after the shades of night had fallen, and considered himself fortunate in finding her alone.

Aunt Cynthy was not very old; but her wrinkles and her style of dressing and of wearing her hair gave her an appearance of extreme age.

Flush Fred found her seated in a small and dingy room, the walls of which could be dimly seen to be ornamented with stuffed or dried lizards, snakes, toads, young alligators, and other uncouth obj'cts.

A tame crow roosted on a stick in one corner,

and near him a black cat reposed on a couch of dirty rags.

The furniture was scanty and of the poorest quality, and the close apartment was loaded with an indefinable but very unpleasant odor, suggestive at once of witchcraft and infectious diseases.

Yet Aunt Cynthy was reputed to be wealthy, and to have money buried all about the bluff, for which nobody dared to search.

A peculiar knock procured admittance for Fred Henning, and he was almost joyfully received by the old Obi woman.

"I knowed dat was you, Marse Fred, and I'se pow'ful glad to see you," said she. "Can you see me, Aunty?" he asked. "I can't make you out in this dark room."

"Ob cou'se I kin see you. Wot's my eyes fur? I'se dark, and you's white, an' dat makes a differ'nce. I 'lowed you'd be comin' up yar 'bout dis time."

"Why so?"

"Cause you's in trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"You's gone an' killed a man."

"What sort of a man?"

"A middlin' ole man, but mighty spry an' peart, wid gray in his beard an' ha'r. You shot him at a game o' kyards, up de ribber. Oh, honey, dem kyards is pow'ful bad t'ings to be foolin' wid, an' dey's giv'n trouble to lots o' good folks as well as bad 'uns."

"Of course you know that, Aunt Cynthy. It has been in all the papers, I suppose."

"I don't neber see de papers. Don't ye know I cain't read, chile?"

"Everybody in Memphis knows it."

"I hain't see'd a Memphis man, white or black, in more'n two days. I'se been shet up yar, 'tendin' to 'ticklear business."

"Well, Aunty, you know all about it, anyhow, and I suppose you know that the sheriff is after me with a warrant."

"Cuss de shur'ff! He ain't no 'count, nobow. Come yar, Gunja, an' speak to yer old frien', Marse Fred."

The black cat rose from its couch, walked to Fred Henning, and rubbed itself against his legs, mewing and purring.

The old negress turned up her oil lamp a little, and Flush Fred placed a gold coin in her hand.

"I want to know," said he, "how I am going to come out of this scrape. What will be the end of it?"

"De end ob dat kind ob scrapes is a rope, sometimes. But you hain't got no call to worry, chile. Ef you wants to git out, an' is 'feard ob de shur'ff, why don't you slide out? Jess git up an' git. 'Pears like you take on 'bout dis scrape mighty queer, jess ez ef you hadn't neber been in no sech scrapes befo'."

"Never in such a scrape as this, Aunty. It pulls me all sorts of ways. More than once I have made up my mind to give myself up, but have backed out, so far."

"Dar's p'ison yar, ef you want it, or a rope. Wot's got hol' ob you, chile?"

"I saw the wife and daughter of the man I killed. They treated me very kindly, and made a friend of me. They did not know then what I had done. It cut me to the heart when I learned that they were his wife and daughter."

"Reckon you fretted 'bout de darter, honey, more'n 'bout de ole woman."

"I did not come here to argue with you, Aunt Cynthy," replied Fred, who was a little miffed at her tone. "I want you to tell me how this business is going to turn out, if you can, and I suppose you can if you will."

"De solemn fac' is, honey, dat I cain't do dat jess yit. It's more'n I kin git hol' ob to-night, an' dar's dis an' dat to be done befo' I kin see cl'ar. Come up yar in de mawnin', two hours befo' noon, an' you'll get de troof. de bull troof, an' nothin' but de troof, shuah as de sun rises."

Fred Henning was obliged to be content with this.

He returned to the city, and found a safe and quiet place to pass the night; but it was not George Dace's room.

Thus far he had not encountered a sheriff's officer or a warrant, and he began to believe that the search for him was not as vigorous as it was represented to be.

Though he had not made himself at all conspicuous, and had not frequented any public places, he had gone about enough to be recognized, and might have been found by a vigilant officer.

He suspected that his friends, in their anxiety for his safety, had exaggerated the facts.

At ten the next morning he was at Aunt Cynthy's hut.

As his was a special appointment, he of course found her alone.

She had shut out the daylight from her dingy room by closing the shutters, and the only illumination was the smoky glimmer of an oil lamp.

Over a bed of coals on the hearth was a small pot, in which was stewing something that did not have the odor of any human food whose cooking the young man had yet encountered.

He suspected it of being something uncanny. This suspicion was confirmed by the old negress.

She took from a tin box a small green snake, that coiled about her hand as she grasped it, and threw it, alive and squirming, into the pot, where it ceased to squirm.

"What are you doing, Aunt Cynthy?" demanded Fred in surprise.

"Makin' a chawn, Marse Fred—de pow's fullest kind ob a chawn."

"What for?"

"Fur you, honey. Dis yar's a solemn an' ser'ous business, an' nuffin' but de toughest kind ob an Obi chawn'll git down to de troof, de hull troof, an' nuffin' but de troof."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Marse Fred, I'se gwine ter raise de dead!"

"To raise the dead?" he exclaimed, in a voice full of horror.

"To raise de dead. De on'y way to fine out how dis yar business is gwine ter come out is to fotch up de sperrit ob de man you killed, an' ax him."

"Don't do that, Aunty! I can't stand it."

"You's got to stan' it, Marse Fred. Jess set right down dar, an' keep as quiet as a mouse, or I'll put a spell onto you that won't let you stir befo' sundown."

The old negress placed three flatirons on the small table in the middle of the room, and on them she set the pot which she took from the hearth.

She threw a dark powder into the steaming mass, and a greenish vapor, with a peculiar but not unpleasant odor, arose from the pot.

Then she prostrated herself upon the floor, and uttered a string of gibberish in a language with which Fred Henning was not acquainted—if, indeed, it was any language at all.

Rising to her feet, she stretched out her long and skinny arm, and spoke in a shrill and unearthly tone:

"Let de sperrit appear!"

A door opposite Fred Henning opened noiselessly, as if of its own accord, and there, darkly framed against the darkness of the room beyond, was the form of Colonel Fowle!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

It was, indeed, Colonel Fowle.

There can be no doubt that expectation goes far in determining identity.

When we fully expect to see a certain person, anything that faintly resembles that person may easily be taken for the original.

This is a phase of human nature which the so-called materializing mediums have largely taken advantage of for their own profit.

Making due allowance for this tendency to error of judgment, Fred Henning was sure that the image before him was that of the man he had killed.

Though the room was dark, he could not be mistaken in the outlines of that too well remembered face.

Yet Colonel Fowle did not look like a ghost; at least, he had nothing of the traditional ghostly style about him.

Dressed in the garments which he had worn when he met his death, with his hat on his head, and with no lack of color in his cheeks, as far as could be observed in the darkness, he might easily have been taken for his living self, and there was nothing remarkable about him but the very singular fact that a dead man should be standing there.

This fact, however, was enough to unsettle the nerves of Flush Fred.

Though the young man was usually brave almost to recklessness, on this occasion he turned ashy pale, and actually trembled.

He sat and stared at the image several minutes before he spoke, and then he could hardly pump up anything more than a whisper.

"What shall I say to him, Aunt Cynthy? I wish you would do the cackling."

"Ax him how he comed here," replied the negress.

"How did you come here?" demanded Fred in a low and sepulchral tone.

"Walked here! Go on with your questions, young man. I am chock-full of answers."

The ghost spoke so surprisingly like a live man, that Flush Fred started up from his chair.

Aunt Cynthy turned up the light in her lamp.

The ghost lifted his hat, showing strips of adhesive plaster on his forehead, and stepped forward, smiling queerly.

"Shake hands, young man," said he, "and then I will sit down and take things easy."

Fred held out his hand, which was firmly seized in a healthy grasp of flesh and blood.

There could be no further illusion.

The ghost was a living man—Colonel Fowle in his proper person, as sound and hearty as he ever was.

Aunt Cynthy dug her knuckles into her sides, and laughed until the tears ran down her withered cheeks.

Fred Henning was more astonished at the sight of the living man than he had been by the

vision of the ghost, and continued to stare wildly at Colonel Fowle as he took a seat.

"You are the man I killed," he said.

"And you are the man who killed me," replied the other.

"And yet you are alive."

"I am happy to say that I am."

"I don't understand it. Will you tell me how it is that you are alive?"

"I am alive, as you see, simply because I am not dead, and never have been. The fact is, my young friend, that your bullet glanced off from this tough skull of mine, and merely stunned me."

"Those infernal fools who were standing around there were in such a hurry to take you out and hang you, that they never stopped to ask whether I was alive or dead, but hurried me back into the cabin, and ran off to see the fun."

"It was no fun to me," remarked Fred.

"No fun to me, either. I was put on a mattress on the floor and lay there like a dead man, and might as well have been a dead man while the fit lasted."

"When the cylinder-head blew out, I suppose the shock roused me, or the excitement, and the stewardess, who saw me sitting up on the mattress, gave a scream."

"I told her to shut her mouth and bring me a drink of whisky and she brought it, as soon as she was certain that there was no danger."

"Then those cursed fools came back—and durned glad they were to find themselves alive—and Captain Beasley washed my head and put some sticking-plaster on it, and I was all right then, needing nothing but my regular drinks and my regular meals."

"I won't undertake to tell you how glad I am to find you alive and well," said Fred Henning. "That would be too much for me. I have given myself a very severe time about that affair."

"All's well that ends well, my boy. Both of us are safe and sound now, and I hope that we may stay so."

"But how is it, colonel, that you can meet me in this friendly way and treat me so kindly? You don't seem to have as hard feelings toward me as I have toward myself."

"I did have a grudge against you, Mr. Henning, and a pretty big one; but I reckon it was as much because you beat me at my own game, as because you shot me."

"When I got to Memphis I determined to give you trouble, and made arrangements for that purpose; but I have learned something about you since that has changed my mind."

"I ran up home to see my folks, and the first thing they did was to tell me how you had saved my daughter Ella from a brute, and what a pleasant visit you had given them. They spoke very highly of you, and they and I will be glad to see you whenever you can come out there and visit us."

"Did you tell them that I was the man who shot you? That was what troubled me so. Are you sure that they don't hate me?"

"Quite sure. You will always be welcome at my house."

To say that Fred Henning was relieved would be the faintest possible expression of his feelings.

He may be said to have regarded Colonel Fowle for the moment as a god, and Aunt Cynthy almost as a goddess.

But the mystery was not yet entirely unraveled, and he renewed his questioning:

"How is it, Colonel Fowle, that I happened to find you here, or that you happened to find me? I don't know but that is the queerest mix of the whole business."

"That is simple enough. Aunt Cynthy used to belong to me. She bought her freedom six or seven years ago, and now she wants to buy her son, who is the best field-hand I have. Though he is a very valuable nigger, I want to make things easy for the old woman, and have put down the price as low as I could. She has not got money enough yet, but I think we can arrange that matter."

"My folks told me that you went to Memphis from our place, and I hurried back here to stop the proceedings I had started, and to look you up."

"I came to Aunt Cynthy's, to bring her a message from Scip and to speak to her about that business of hers, and of course I told her about that affair on the river, and the rest of it."

"Shortly after that, you came here and told your story. She sent me word to be here in the morning, and arranged the rest of the business to suit herself."

"I am under everlasting obligations to her for bringing us together," said Fred, with a fervor that testified to the depth of his sincerity. "Just let me know, colonel, the amount that is needed to make up the balance to buy off that boy of hers, and I will hand it to you."

"You's chipped in a lot ob dollahs fur dat pu'chase a'ready, Marse Fred," remarked Aunt Cynthy.

"And I mean to chip in some more. But Colonel Fowle and I will settle that at our convenience."

"I suppose you will walk back to the city," said the colonel. "I am going that way, and we may as well walk in together."

The dead man and the man who killed him walked away the best of friends, each with good cause to be thankful.

Aunt Cynthy, when she was left alone in her hut, felt that she too had good reason to be thankful.

Fred Henning walked the streets of Memphis erect and free, fearing neither ghost nor sheriff, and quartered himself at the Gayoso, where he found Arthur Helmsley.

"Luck is against you now, and on my side," said he. "Colonel Fowle is alive and well."

"I had already learned that," answered Arthur. "How did you come to be so sure that he was dead?"

"The boys told me so, and said that the sheriff was looking for me with a warrant."

"And you supposed, as a matter of course, that you had killed him; but they must have known better. I am glad for your sake that he is alive."

"I am afraid that his turning up gives you a set-back, my boy. But the colonel and I are good friends now, and you may bet high that I will do all I can to help you, in spite of the fact that I am in love with the young lady myself."

The same evening Fred met George Dace, and at once interrupted that individual when he began to censure him for his carelessness in running about.

"Say, George, why did you put up that job on me? Why did you tell that infernal lie about the excitement and the sheriff, and all that?"

"Well, Fred, the fact is that it's mighty seldom we get a chance to run a rig on you, and when we do, we must make the most of it."

"All right, my lad. If I don't pay you for that before long, my name's not Fred Henning."

CHAPTER IX.

PLUCKING A PARSON.

THE Philadelphia was one of the best of the Pittsburg boats, and was familiarly known as the "Old Reliable."

She was a popular craft, too, and when she came into the lower river there were many travelers who preferred her to the newer and more splendid steamers that hailed from St. Louis and Louisville, as she had the reputation for safety, and as Captain Klinefelter and Clerk Barr were well known and highly respected all along the route.

When she landed at Memphis, on one of her downward trips, a few days after Flush Fred had recovered his balance, she took on a number of passengers.

Among them were three members of the sporting fraternity—namely, George Dace, Tom Davis, and Sam Bowers, the identical three who had acted the part of Job's comforters to Fred Henning when he was in sore trouble.

They had taken passage, as may be supposed, for the purpose of "working the boat," and they proceeded to make themselves at home and "take points" on the passengers, with the intention of profiting by the knowledge thus acquired when night and games set in.

One of those who came aboard at Memphis was a man of clerical appearance, rather seedy in his dress, and with an unmistakable ministerial style and twang.

He wore straight black hair and blue spectacles, was rustic as well as rusty, and was registered at the clerk's office as Rev. Samuel Sawtell.

He had been but a little while on the boat when all who came within reach of his voice were made acquainted with his profession and his present purpose.

The Baptist brethren among whom he was settled, he said, at a small town in Mississippi, were anxious to build a church, and he had been commissioned to solicit contributions from members of the denomination in older and wealthier communities.

His success in Memphis had been highly encouraging, and he was enthusiastic in praise of the liberality of the good Baptists of that city.

He also developed a proclivity for seeking solace at the bar—secretly at first, and then more openly—explaining to the barkeeper that he had been advised to do so by a worthy brother who was a prominent physician in Memphis.

"I am afflicted with bronchitis," he said, "and my little flock besought me to procure the best advice. Brother Eames told me that a little—ah—whisky now and then is needed to open the bronchial tubes, remove the obstructions, and restore tone to the—ah—organs in that vicinity."

"Cert'nly, sir, cert'nly," chimed in the barkeeper. "Nothin' like it, sir. Lots of folks troubled that way, and good whisky, such as I keep, is just the the thing for 'em. Sugar, sir? Yessir."

George Dace and his companions closely ob-

served the Rev. Mr. Sawtell and his talk and manner, and marked him as a victim.

"We must work the parson, boys," said Dace. "I believe he will pan out better than anything we can tackle here."

This was quite legitimate—at least, in the view of the sporting men.

Though they were always willing, when flush of money, to contribute to churches, preachers, or any objects of merit or charity, they were none the less willing to make a prey of church funds in the hands of a parson.

As they regarded the operation, it was merely robbing Peter to pay Paul.

So they cultivated the acquaintance of the Rev. Mr. Sawtell, and had no difficulty in doing so.

George Dace invited him to refresh himself at the bar, and the parson gratefully accepted the invitation.

"I believe that I may partake without indiscretion," said he, "as I am medically advised to try a little—ah—whisky, and I already feel a partial relief from my bronchial trouble. A little sugar in mine, young man."

One drink led to another, although the parson did not offer to purchase any, and he soon became mildly hilarious and a little boastful.

His new friends led him on to talk of his success in securing funds for the building of his church, a subject which greatly pleased him, and about which he was well disposed to brag.

He produced, with other money, a roll of bills, and proceeded to tell how he got them:

"This was a single contribution," he said, "from a good brother in Memphis. Yes, my young friend, if you insist upon it—a little sugar in mine. He told me that he was flush—meaning, as he explained, that he had plenty of money, and said that he had just got even with the bank."

"The name of the bank struck me, as it was a Scripture name which I had not supposed was applied to banking-institutions. It was—ah—Pharaoh."

"Ah!" simultaneously muttered the three sporting men.

"You are acquainted with the bank, I presume?"

"Yes," replied George Dace, "it is a bank, as Shakespeare says, on which many a wild time grows."

"I don't exactly understand you; but that was the bank the good brother mentioned. He was feeling very thankful, and wanted to christen his luck, as he remarked. So he gave me one hundred dollars for the church. Well, really, my young friend, I am not sure that I need any more medicine; but, to oblige you, I will take a little with sugar in it."

The Rev. Mr. Sawtell again moistened his bronchial tubes at the expense of his new friends.

"I have great reason to be thankful for the success of my mission," he said. "In Memphis I collected nearly six hundred dollars to gladden the hearts of the poor Baptist brethren at home."

"I believe that I ought to enlighten you on one point, Mr. Sawtell," said George Dace. "The bank of which your friend spoke must have been a faro bank."

"So he said. The Pharaoh bank—that was the name."

"But a faro bank, Mr. Sawtell, is a gambling institution. Your friend, I suppose, had been betting against the bank, and had won a lot of money, and that made him liberal."

The parson was cast down for a moment, but quickly brightened up.

"But he got the money from a Pharaoh bank," he argued, "and that is what we may call spoiling the Egyptians, a practice which has the sanction of Scripture. I see no objection to that."

"Why shouldn't you do the same?" urged Dace. "My friends and I are willing to chip in for your church; but we would rather do it in the way of a game. Just sit down with us and try a little of what we call poker, and what is to hinder you from having a good pile to take home to the brethren?"

The parson admitted that in his young and unregenerated days he had occasionally fingered the pasteboards, but protested that he knew nothing about poker.

"We will teach you," said George. "It is simple enough, and only for pastime, you know. Besides, a new hand at the game always has the best luck—that is the invariable rule. If you find your luck running to suit you, you can get a nice sum out of us for your church."

George Dace's persuasive arguments, together with another glass of anti-bronchitis, decided the wavering mind of Mr. Samuel Sawtell, and he sat down at a table with Dace and two of his friends.

A pack of cards was ordered from the bar, and Dace proceeded to explain to the clerical gentleman the mysteries of draw poker.

The game was not at all mysterious as George briefly but clearly laid down its laws.

It was only necessary to hold certain cards, which had a certain value, and to bet on those that were worth betting on.

The remembrance of his unregenerate days enabled the parson to get hold of this, and also to fix in his mind after a fashion the value of the hands he might hold.

But his education lacked completeness, and practice was necessary.

The game began with an "ante" of five cents the lowest coin known in that portion of our happy land—and Mr. Sawtell, as George Dace had predicted, had the proverbial luck of a new beginner.

But it was still requisite to continue the explanations of the value of the cards, and occasionally to look over his hand to satisfy his inquiring mind.

At last George Dace declared that he understood the game well enough, and might play his hand without any further help.

The parson, who was elated by winning small sums, and still further elated by more of the anti-bronchitis, was of the same opinion.

The three professionals were sure that they had never got hold of a "softer thing."

Here was a man with plenty of money, ignorant of the game, and half-seas-over.

They had only to arrange the cards to suit themselves, and there could be no question of their winning.

The only point of anxiety was the extent to which they could induce him to bet when they got ready to "rake in his pile."

This point was practically settled when the parson showed his recklessness by ordering at his own expense a round of drinks.

At that time the game may be said to have fairly begun.

The Rev. Mr. Sawtell's luck stuck to him, and he won at nearly every deal, a few small pots being taken in by the others for the sake of variety.

After one of his unsuccessful hands it came to the parson's turn to deal.

He was then excited to such a degree that he recklessly ordered more anti-bronchitis, and shuffled the cards so that half the pack fell on the floor.

When he had picked them up, he dealt the four hands decently enough.

Davis "came in" with a pair of jacks, and George Dace with three queens, and Bowers "passed out."

In the draw Davis got two ten-spots, and George Dace hauled in another queen.

Then the betting began, small at first, but increasing when it reached the parson, who "raised" the last man ten dollars.

This was not according to the programme, as it had been arranged that the big and back-breaking game should be played when George Dace next got the deal; but the hands were so much better than had yet appeared that it seemed desirable to humor the parson to the extent of his foolishness.

"Fifty dollars better," said Dace, when Tom Davis had made his stake good.

The Rev. Mr. Sawtell frowned as he examined his cards.

"I think you told me," he said, "that two pair is a good hand."

"Yes; but you musn't let us know what you've got," replied Dace.

"Well, my young friend, as I collected this money by my own exertions, and as I think I have a good hand, I will endeavor to aid the church by venturing one hundred dollars."

"Fifty better," promptly replied Dace, as Tom Davis passed out.

"Really, this is too exciting for my equilibrium," remarked the parson. "But I must continue to cast my bread upon the waters."

He increased his stake fifty dollars, and Dace at once raised it fifty more.

Mr. Sawtell, by emptying his pockets, succeeded in finding enough to make his stake good.

"I can do no more," he said, "as I have no more money."

"You call, then," said his opponent. "What have you got, my ministerial friend?"

"Two pair."

"It's no good. I have four queens."

"But my two pair are a little bigger than your two pair," remarked the parson, as he laid down four kings.

Words would never do justice to the surprise and consternation of George Dace and his confederates.

They could not speak while the Rev. Mr. Sawtell bundled the money into his pockets.

Just then the steamboat's whistle was blown, and the bell was rung.

"Sorry to leave you, gentlemen, but that is my landing," said the parson, as he rose and hurried away.

In a few moments, with his carpet sack in his hand, he left the cabin, and the men who had marked him as a victim watched him sadly as he went ashore.

When the boat had backed out, the second clerk brought a card to George Dace.

It was directed to George, and on it he read these words:

"Thanks for your interest in the little church. Reckon we are even now. My bronchitis is much better."

Yours truly,

"FRED HENNING."

CHAPTER X.

A DIFFICULTY SMOOTHED OVER.

COLONEL TOM FOWLE was in excellent spirits when he returned to his home from Memphis; but there was trouble on the plantation soon after his arrival.

He had not made another attempt to go to Cincinnati, but contented himself with writing letters to merchants there, stating the quality of his cotton, and inquiring as to the best terms they would make for its purchase.

In his pocket he had the price of his "boy" Scipio, Fred Henning having added to Aunt Cynthy's money enough to bring it up to the planter's figure.

So Scipio was made a free man, and he went to Illinois, and it is to be supposed, as he was a strong, healthy, and intelligent negro, though entirely uneducated, that he was able to make a living for himself there.

The colonel was particularly well pleased with the fact that he had found Fred Henning, and with the way in which he had found him, which he regarded as highly dramatic and intensely comical.

He had also taken a strong liking to the young sporting man.

As Colonel Damas in the play says that he never likes a man so well as after he has fought him, so Colonel Fowle may be supposed to have never felt a real affection for a man until after he had been shot in the head by him.

He told with great gusto the story of his discovery of Fred Henning, and of the peculiar fashion in which Aunt Cynthy brought them together, and this recital was highly interesting as well as amusing to his wife and daughter.

The trouble began with Ella.

Her father did not seem to be as indignant as she had expected to find him about her adventure with Pressley Munford.

When she spoke of it to him he soon managed to change the talk to the subject of Arthur Helmsley.

"Have you seen that young man since I have been away, Ella?" he asked.

"No, sir. I understand that he has not been at home in several weeks."

"Glad of that. But you seem to keep the run of him a little too well. I don't want you to see him, Ella. I don't want you to have anything to do with him."

"You are hard on me, father. You know that I am fond of him, and that there is nobody else I care for—that is, no young gentleman."

"I tell you, Ella, that I don't want you to see him, or to speak of him, or to hear him spoken of. Do you suppose that I would allow you to marry the son of my bitterest enemy?"

"But the son is not your enemy, father. He says that he has not the slightest grudge against you."

"I would rather see you lying dead at my feet, than married to any man who bears the name of Helmsley."

She shuddered, though she was used to strong expressions from that source.

"Of course you can run off and marry him if you want to," continued the colonel. "Some girls do that sort of thing nowadays. Nancy Trice did; but you know what became of her."

"I would never do anything against your will," answered Ella. "I think you ought to be sure of that. But you have said that you want me to marry, and you know that eligible young men are scarce in this neighborhood. Of course you would not want me to think of marrying Press Munford."

Colonel Fowle frowned, and was lost in meditation for some minutes before he spoke.

"I don't know about that, Ella," he said, at last. "I am not altogether sure that it would be a bad thing. There is more than one point to consider in the business of marriage. The fact is, my child, that my affairs are not in a first rate condition by a large majority. Sometimes I doubt whether I will have anything at all to leave you, and that worries me like the mischief."

"I thought you were rich," remarked Ella.

"It looks like it, I know, and I pass for a rich man with those who are not well-posted; but the truth is that I never more than make both ends meet, and sometimes there is a big gap. Every crop is drawn on for its full value before it is made, and at the end of the year I have less than nothing to show for it. That is a bad way of doing business, I admit; but it costs us a heap to live, and your brother's expenses at college are something awful. I am afraid that he is getting to be a spendthrift."

"We might live more cheaply," she suggested.

"That would never do at all. If I should give up the old style, I would be looked down on, and my credit wouldn't be worth a dog's notice. Things are worse with me than you can imagine, my child—worse than your mother knows—and unless they change for the better, I am not sure that I can even hold the old plantation. It would kill me to have to give that up. But if you can marry well, Ella—marry a substantial man with land and money—that will take a great weight off my mind."

"Some things are better than land and

money," said Ella. "I don't know that I need to be rich."

"You have always held up your head with the best, my girl. You have never been obliged to do any work, and have had niggers to wait on you. You couldn't stand it to come down and herd with the poor whites. John Munford, now, is a rich man without doubt, and Pressley is his only child. You might go farther and fare worse."

Then the girl began to get angry.

"Is it possible," she demanded, "that you can speak of him to me in that way, when you remember his outrageous behavior at the time Mr. Henning rescued me from him?"

"Well, now, Ella," replied the colonel in a conciliatory tone, "I have thought that there may have been some mistake about that. Of course Mr. Henning acted like a gentleman, and did the right thing; but it don't stand to reason that Pressley Munford, a neighbor's son, would really mean to insult you and set your father against him. You disliked him, and were scared, and there may have been some mistake about it."

Ella declared, with an injured air, that in her belief there was no mistake about it at all, and her father willingly dropped the subject.

Colonel Fowle was confirmed in his opinion as to the mistake—if it really was his opinion—by Pressley Munford's father, whom he met shortly after his conversation with Ella, and who sought him out for the purpose of explaining what he styled "the unfortunate occurrence."

It was surely a mistake on Ella's part, the elder Munford insisted, and he was afraid, considering her prejudice against Pressley, that she was too easily mistaken. The young man admitted that he had been excited and a little angry when she refused to have anything to do with him; but he had not the faintest intention of harming or insulting her. He had merely declared that she must listen to his suit, when she got frightened and called for help. Then a man came up whom Mr. Munford had ascertained to be a notoriously bad and dangerous character.

"Hold on there!" interrupted the colonel. "I know Fred Henning, and consider him quite a decent fellow. I had a little difficulty with him, but have found him to be as straight as most of us."

"That is a mistake of yours, colonel," replied John Munford. "The man is a river gambler, and they can hardly be classed among decent people. It is my belief that he deserves hanging, and that he will yet be hung. But you have a right to your opinion. As I was saying, when that fellow came along my son was of course too proud to make any explanations to him, and quietly walked away. He is very sorry that the young lady misconstrued his motive, and wants to apologize to her, though he really don't consider himself deserving of much blame. As for that trooper of yours, colonel, just let me know when you get ready to sell him, and I will give you as much as anybody, and pay cash."

So the disagreeable *rencontre* was smoothed over, and Colonel Fowle took an early opportunity to inform his family that the affair had been satisfactorily explained, and that he expected them to treat John Munford and his son as friends.

Ella said nothing, but inwardly declared that nothing could ever persuade her to be friendly with either of them, and her mother was quietly of the same opinion.

CHAPTER XI.

TRouble on TROUBLE'S HEAD.

THE next trouble in Colonel Fowle's family was a dark and mysterious matter.

Shortly after his return he had loaned to an Arkansas man named Huffner the sum of three thousand dollars, happening to have that amount in the house, including the price that was paid for Scipio.

He had not really been able to spare the money, as it belonged in fact to his creditors; but John Munford, who introduced the borrower, had explained to him that it was a rare chance to get a high rate of interest; that the loan would be amply secured by a mortgage on land in Arkansas; that it would fall due in a short time, and that he might as well get the interest as give anybody else the benefit of it.

So the colonel had concluded that he would put off his creditors, whose charges had doubtless been exorbitant, and loan the money.

The mortgage was to be taken to Arkansas to be recorded by a gentleman of the neighborhood, who was going to Helena in a few days.

In the meantime the colonel kept it locked up, together with a few hundred dollars in money, in a drawer of a desk in a little room on the ground floor which he styled his office.

No such nuisances as burglars, or thieves of any description, had ever been heard of in that neighborhood, and the thought of a possible loss did not enter his head.

Yet, when he unlocked his desk-drawer on

the morning of the day when he expected the gentleman who was going to Helena, the money and the mortgage were both gone!

The drawer had been broken open, and the marks of a chisel or some such instrument were plainly visible.

Then there was trouble in the Fowle family.

The colonel raged and stormed about the house, and all the sympathy and soothing of his wife and daughter could not pacify him.

It was a long time before he was able to speak of the matter with any degree of calmness.

Then he declared that the robbery was unheard of and unaccountable.

"Who besides yourself knew what was in the drawer?" asked Mrs. Fowle.

"Nobody but you, my dear?"

"I am not sure that I knew it. Was anybody with you when you put the paper away?"

"Mr. Huffner, the man who got the money, was in the room, and John Munford, who witnessed the signing, and the county clerk, who attended to the legal part of the business."

"They are all above suspicion, I suppose."

"Of course they are, Maria. Some thief wanted to get the money, and happened to take the paper with it."

"It is strange that the dogs gave no alarm."

"The thief must have been somebody who was acquainted with them, and who was acquainted with the house and with my ways, too. Scip left here the day after that business was settled."

"We have always considered Scip an honest boy," said Mrs. Fowle.

"Yes; but he may have wanted money to give him a start up yonder. Well, Maria, I don't expect to see the money again; but the mortgage matter, I hope, can be arranged. John Munford tells me that Huffner is the right kind of a man, and I have no doubt that when the loss is explained to him he will make me a new mortgage. I will write to him."

The colonel did write, and in the course of time he got a letter, but not from Huffner, saying that the gentleman had gone to Missouri to look after a lead mine, in which he was interested.

But that letter was not received until after more trouble had been piled upon Colonel Fowle's devoted head.

He went to John Munford with the story of his trouble, and that gentleman sympathized with him most heartily, but assured him that the mortgage business would be straightened up, as Huffner would be willing to do the fair thing.

"It will take time," said he, "and you may have to go through some legal formalities; but it will be all right in the end."

"I am afraid that I will be pressed for money before it is fixed up," complained the colonel. "Indeed, I find myself in want of funds already. I thought that if my creditors should be inclined to make it hot for me, I might arrange with them by an assignment of the mortgage, and still collect the interest. But I wish now I hadn't let that money go."

"If you want money, colonel, suppose you sell me Nero. I am anxious to own that horse, and I won't take any advantage of you. What do you call him worth, now?"

"My price is two thousand dollars, and I would hate to sell him at that."

"I will pay you that amount for him—that is, in a few days, when I will have some cash coming in."

"It is a bargain," replied the colonel, and the prospect of ready cash raised his spirits at once.

But before the two or three days had elapsed, Nero was missing.

The horse, which was young, a very promising trotter and a valuable animal, had been the pet and the pride of the family since he was foaled.

He had a special clover-lot near the house, into which he was turned during the day, and at night he was secured in a locked stable.

One morning, the negro servant who had charge of him came to the house in great consternation, bringing the astounding information that Nero had been "stolen away."

He had locked Nero in his stable as usual, and had put the key in his pocket; but in the morning the lock was found to have been wrenched off, and the horse was gone.

It was useless to try to track him, and the manner and direction of his disappearance remained a mystery.

Colonel Fowle was even more enraged at the loss of Nero than he had been at the theft of his mortgage and money.

It seemed to him that he had sustained a double loss—both of the horse and of the sum he was to get for him.

His wife and daughter with difficulty restrained him from inflicting an unmerciful whipping upon the negro groom "to make him confess."

While he was fretting under this affliction, he received a sharp letter from his principal creditor in Memphis, insisting upon the settlement of his claim, and threatening legal proceedings.

As Colonel Fowle had as yet heard nothing

from Helena, he was put to his stumps, as he expressed it, to raise money.

"Maria," he said to his wife one day, "I have decided to sell the gin-house in the old field. It has never brought me in enough to pay me for my trouble, and the machinery needs repairs which I can't afford to make."

"Can you sell it to advantage?" she asked.

"Yes. As it happens I have a good offer for it in cash just when I need money. John Munford knows some men in Memphis who want to buy it and enlarge the business. It is in a good location, you know, and has a fair run of custom. I will write to them to-day, and accept the offer."

He did write; but, before he got an answer to bind the bargain, the gin-house caught fire at night, and was entirely destroyed, together with a quantity of seed and lint cotton.

There was no insurance, and it could hardly be doubted that the fire was the work of an incendiary.

The colonel was so completely cast down by this disaster, that he was even incapable of venting his indignation.

"Either I am the unluckiest man living," said he, "or I have some bitter enemy in the neighborhood that I know nothing about."

"It seems to me," remarked Mrs. Fowle, "that everything you have undertaken in connection with John Munford, or under his advice, has turned out badly."

"There is nothing in that, Maria—nothing at all in that."

"But it has been very unlucky."

"Yes, I am a very unlucky man, and now I am in such a bad fix that I must begin to try to haul in my horns. I am glad that Marshall's vacation is at hand. I shall write to the boy to save his money, and come straight home, and it is doubtful whether he can go back to college."

CHAPTER XII.

A BRAND FROM THE BURNING.

THE landing at which Flush Fred left the Philadelphia, after his little game with George Dace and his partners, was the city of Helena.

Not much of a city then or since, but quite a bright and pleasant town when it was not afflicted by an overflow.

Such a visitation had recently occurred, and its effects were still visible in pools of stagnant water, upset sidewalks, stained and sorrowful houses, and a variety of stranded dugouts, rafts, and other high-water craft.

But Flush Fred saw little of this dilapidation just then, as it was dark when he landed, and he gladly accepted the offer of a young African to pilot him to a hotel.

He had come ashore simply because he had played and won his game, and did not care to go further on the Philadelphia.

Besides, as he had got even with his Job's comforters, it would have been adding insult to injury to remain on the boat.

He reflected on this matter as he went, and by the time he reached the unpretentious hostelry for which he was bound, had made up his mind as to what he would do next.

In Helena he would remain, until such a boat as suited him should come along, and he might conclude to "work the town."

"This rig has worked amazingly well," he said to himself. "If it fooled George Dace and the others, it would fool anybody. I will stick to it awhile, and perhaps may pick up a sucker or two, or take a rise out of some of the boys."

So he registered as Rev. Samuel Sawtell, and in the room that was allotted to him he slept the sleep of the just.

In the morning he sallied out after breakfast to investigate the moral and pecuniary condition of Helena.

After he had successfully introduced "the bronchitis gag" at a saloon, but without meeting any person who seemed likely to indulge in a little "draw," he came to a small office in and about which there was some excitement.

It was the office of the police magistrate and Fred stepped in, to look about and take items concerning the administration of justice in that latitude.

There were but three prisoners who had been brought in from the calaboose, and one of them was a person whom the stranger recognized at once.

It was a humpbacked fellow named Charley Schramm, who was well known on the river as one of the lower class of gamblers.

Though he was an adept at various games he was not considered likely to rise to eminence in his profession, as his figure and his habits were against him.

Charley was a young person of low origin and instincts, uneducated, slovenly by nature and practice, and strongly addicted to indulgence in the "flowing bowl."

The last named failing prompted him to frequent sprees, which usually ended in the gutter, and put him peculiarly in a chronic condition of needing to be "staked" by some prosperous and sympathetic member of the profession.

When Flush Fred saw him in Helena he naturally concluded that Charley had been enjoying one of his "periodicals," and the humpback

surely did present to the observer the appearance of a river town that had been badly flooded.

The charge against him, as stated by the local guardian of the peace, was "drunk and raising a row."

Charley Schramm did not deny it, and made no appeal for mercy when the official in charge announced the penalty of his offence.

"Three dollars and costs."

Then it was that Flush Fred lifted up his voice, as he would have said, like a pelican in the wilderness.

"I will pay the fine of that unfortunate young man. It will be a merciful, and possibly a providential act."

The official figured up the sum to be paid, which amounted "with costs," to over sixteen dollars.

"The total reminds me," remarked the Rev. Mr. Sawtell, "of the dress of a woman of Babylon. It cost very little for the goods, but wealth was required to purchase the trimmings."

The magistrate stared at the clerical gentleman, and so did Charley Schramm.

"Peradventure the youth may be snatched as a brand from the burning," said Fred, as he settled the bill. "Come with me, my young friend, and after I have administered food to your body I will consider the needs of your spiritual condition."

"Queer customer that," remarked the guardian of the peace, as the Rev. Mr. Sawtell walked away with the culprit.

Charley Schramm doubtless wondered as much as anybody, but said nothing, as he was then in a condition of such muddle-headedness and depression, that he was scarcely able to collect his scattered ideas, and was ready to accept any sort of a fate without a murmur.

Nor did Flush Fred say anything, until he had brought the humpback into his room at the hotel.

Then he placed before him a bottle of whisky and a glass.

"Peradventure, my poor youth," said he, "you may be benefited physically by a hair of the dog that bit you. Verily there are times when strong spirit is a comforter and a sustainer. But ask me not for more; for at the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder."

Charley eagerly and liberally helped himself to the liquor, and his benefactor followed suit with greater moderation.

"I'm a thousand times obliged to you, stranger," said the humpback; "but b'grayshus, I can't think how you happened to take pity on such a poor devil as I am."

"You have an honest face, my poor young friend."

Charley almost grinned.

"You have an honest face, though you are not lovely to look upon, and you remind me of a Sabbath-school scholar of mine who unfortunately perished while fording a creek to go to church one Lord's Day."

Charley did grin. He had never before been suspected of having an honest face. It was one of his drawbacks in his profession that he did not have an honest face. He was, moreover, so strongly opposed to water in every shape, that he was not likely to meet the fate of the Sabbath school boy.

"I would fain," continued the parson, "redeem you from the vice of intemperance, and put you in the way of earning a respectable living. Yes, my son, you may partake of a small portion of the spirits."

Charley, who had been looking longingly at the bottle, speedily availed himself of this permission to moisten his gullet.

"That's the ticket!" he exclaimed. "The liquor won't bother me any more. I've had my spree, and it's over. I went down to the bottom, and now I'm coming up. What I need, b'grayshus, as you say, is somebody to stake me, and there's suckers in this town, b'grayshus, that I can win a pile off of."

The parson groaned, and raised his hands in horror.

"You needn't be offish," said the humpback. "You shall be pardners with me, b'grayshus, and I'll divide square, sure's my name is Charley Schramm."

This was too much for the gravity of the Rev. Mr. Sawtell, who laughed outright.

"What in thunder you larfin' at?" demanded Charley.

"Young man, do you know me?"

"Durned if I do. Never set eyes on you afore, b'grayshus."

The parson tore off his blue spectacles.

"Look at me now."

"Seems like I'd seen you afore, but I can't place you, b'grayshus. You look sorter like—but it can't be."

Charley changed his voice.

"If I should make one or two more slight changes, you would know me as—"

"Flush Fred, b'grayshus!" exclaimed the delighted humpback. "The best feller on the river! This is the richest game yet. I'm as glad to see you as if I broke a bank. But what are you doin' here in that rig?"

Fred Henning related, evidently with pleasure, the story of the little game he had played with George Dace and the others on the Philadelphia, and his companion highly enjoyed the recital.

"I thought I would stick to this rig for awhile," said he, "be ause I may make it pay me in Helena, and I will give you a chance to help me, as I have found you and you belong to me."

"Count me in all over, b'grayshus."

"I will count you in for what you are worth. Now, Charley, go down-stairs and take a wash. Don't be afraid of the water for once, and brush up and make yourself decent. Do you need any clothes?"

"A few little things."

"And of course you are flat broke. Here's a ten. Get what you need, and account to me for the money, and hurry back here for dinner. Not a drink while you are out, Charley—mind that."

The humpback went out, and Flush Fred lighted a cigar, sure that his commands would be implicitly obeyed.

CHAPTER XIII.

FLUSH FRED DISCOVERS SOMETHING.

WHEN Charley Schramm returned to Flush

Fred, his appearance was decidedly more respectable than it had been when he was arraigned before the magistrate.

Fred, who had resumed the character of the Rev. Samuel Sawtell, took him down to dinner, and after dinner they sought a quiet place to smoke and talk.

"Here is the change for your ten," said the humpback, emptying his pocket of money.

"You may keep it for your honesty," replied Fred.

"That reminds me, old man, of a little while ago, when you told me that I had an honest face. You said it so seriously, b'grayshus, that I could scarcely keep from snickerin'. Thinks I, here's the softest thing I've come across in a month o' Sundays, and I'll just work the parson for all he's worth, b'grayshus!"

"If you had tried it, young man, it would have astonished you to see yourself snapped up. I don't look for any more gratitude from you, Charley, than you would have shown to the parson; but I do expect you to be honest and truthful toward me, and to mind what I say."

"You may bet your last dollar, Fred, that I'll stick to you like a plaster as long as you will let me hang on."

"I mean that you shall. And now I want to know what you have been doing with yourself lately."

The humpback's countenance fell, and it was clear that he was not anxious to have his antecedents inquired into. The eyes of his "honest face" refused to meet the look of his inquisitor.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" repeated Fred.

"You know what I had been doin', b'grayshus, when you picked me up."

"Yes; but your sprees don't last long. They are hot and heavy, and soon over, like a thunder shower. You have not been seen on the river or near it for some weeks, and none of the boys knew what had become of you. We thought you must have gone home to your folks, or tumbled into the river in a fit of the jimmies."

"I hain't got no folks, and never got down to the triangles yet."

"What have you been doing, then? It will be best for you to own up."

"The fact is, Fred, that I've j'ined an association."

"An association? Not a temperance or Sunday school association, I'm keen to bet."

"Not by a long shot, b'grayshus."

"And not an association of honest men."

"Well, sca'cely. You seem to be acquainted with me, old chap. As you are the only man who is likely to help me out of the scrape I am in, and as you won't try to do it unless I give you the rock-bottom facts, b'grayshus, my best chance is to make a clean breast of the whole business, b'grayshus."

"Now you're talking, Charley. Fire ahead."

"You know, Fred, that I never got along well on the river, 'cause o' one thing and t'other. I fretted because I couldn't hold up my head with the rest of the boys, and was always in hot water."

"Hot what? Nobody ever accused you of meddling with water."

"You know what I mean. One day when I was in this very town, cussin' my luck, and wishin' I had money enough to get blind drunk on, b'grayshus, I fell in with a man who said he had seen me often on the river, and had taken a notion to me; but he didn't tell me that I had an honest face, b'grayshus."

"Of course he didn't, if he had sense."

"He seemed to be glad that I wasn't that sort, and he told me how I could get lots of money by j'ining the association, and it's an association of crooks, b'grayshus, as I reckon you have guessed."

"Easy enough to guess that."

"So I j'ined," continued the humpback; "but I haven't been initiated yet, and am only a workin' member, as they call it. But I've found out enough to know that this is the headquarters, and that the head crook—the man they call the boss—has a fine place up in Tennessee, where he is a high-flyer among the big bugs, b'grayshus. There's another agency down in Mississippi, near Friar's Point."

"What do they go for, Charley?"

"Don't you know? Sometimes it's bosses—one thing and another—most anythin' that can be carried off and turned into money. Workin' the three States, you see, is mighty handy. What's picked up in Tennessee is run off into Mississippi or Arkansas, and Mississippi plunder goes over here or up there, and so on. They've got a little steamboat, called the Sunset, that used to run up the Forked Deer. She pretends to be a tradin' boat now; but they use her mostly for the association's business. She is light enough, b'grayshus, to run over a field of grass when the dew's on."

"Don't you know, Charley, that if you stick to that sort of business you are likely to bring up in the State prison, or at the end of a rope?"

"You bet I do, b'grayshus, and that's what's worryin' me, 'specielly as they don't do the fair thing by me and let me in among the high-binders. They strike it rich sometimes by makin' deeds of other folks' land. Of course that's a touch above me; but I don't like the style of gettin' more kicks than coppers, b'grayshus. Oh, I'm keen to cut loose."

"Why don't you cut loose, then?"

"The fact is, Fred, that the boss has got the devil's own grip on me. When I j'ined they set me to stealin' a boss, and I stole it—the worst job I could have done, b'grayshus. It seems that they can prove that I did it, without mixin' themselves up with me, and the boss tells me that if I kick he will see to it that I suffer for that trick, and John Munford is a man who means what he says, b'grayshus."

Fred Henning, who had been listening rather languidly to the humpback's account, suddenly awoke to a lively interest in the subject.

"John Munford?" he exclaimed. "Is that the name of the man you call the boss?"

"Yes. I didn't mean to let it out; but his name is John Munford."

"And he has a place in Tennessee. Is it near Memphis?"

"Somewhere above Memphis—not far from the river."

"You have seen him, I suppose. What does he look like?"

"A tall and big-boned man, about fifty, I reckon, with a big black beard with gray in it, small eyes, and a heavy voice."

"The very man!" exclaimed Fred. "Charley, that's the John Munford who wants to kill me."

"What does he want to kill you for?"

"We had a row over a game of poker. He tried to put the cards up on me, and I beat him at that game, of course, and beat him out of a big pile of money, too. He has sworn that he will kill me, and he went for me in Cairo not long ago, but lost his chance."

"If that's the case," remarked the humpback, "you had better keep out of his way, b'grayshus; for he is mighty apt to fetch you, sooner or later."

Fred Henning had put on his considering-cap, and he smoked meditatively for a few minutes.

Then he fixed his eyes on the humpback.

"Charley," he said, "why shouldn't you get ahead of the man who wants to put you in hock, by sending him there? Why shouldn't you fix something on him, and explode a mine under him? Why shouldn't you have the credit and the reward of breaking up that band of robbers?"

"None of that for me," replied the humpback. "It wouldn't pay me a cent, b'grayshus. The reward would be all in credit, and a mighty long credit at that. Then, again, some of the association would be sure to make dog's meat o' me, b'grayshus."

"I thought, Charley Schramm, that you were never afraid of anything but water."

"I don't believe I am afraid; but I hain't got head enough for that sort o' thing, b'grayshus."

"You don't need to have. I will attend to the head business. All I want you to do is to keep in with those pals of yours for a while, and introduce me among them. I will see that you get a stake when you need one, and will steer you clear of trouble."

"It will be easy enough to introduce you, b'grayshus. The head crook here in Helena is a man named Lewis Mosely, who keeps a liquor shop near the edge of town."

"Take me to him."

"All right. How shall I introduce you?"

"As Rev. Samuel Sawtell, a person who has gone to the bad, and then let me play my game to suit myself. If you ever call me anything but Parson among that crowd, I will break your head."

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE TRAVELERS' HOME.

ABOUT Lewis Mosely there was nothing of the appearance generally attributed to the bandit chief of romance.

Indeed, he would never have been supposed by people who were unacquainted with him to be anything but what he purported to be—the proprietor of the unpretentious inn known as the Travelers' Home.

In person he was short and stout, with a nearly bald head, a stubby gray beard, full and fat face, small eyes, and a generally Teutonic appearance.

When he spoke it was with an accent and some of the idioms of a German Jew, and it may be presumed that that was what he was.

The Travelers' Home, which was styled a hotel because it boasted a few beds and a bar, was a house of call or stopping-place for farmers and market men who came in from the country, and for whose teams there was a shedded-yard.

Outside of this class of custom it had but little business to do, except with men who were specially interested in the proprietor.

Lewis Mosely was not a little surprised when Charley Schramm came to his hostelry accompanied by a clerical-looking gentleman whom he introduced as Rev. Samuel Sawtell, from Mississippi.

"Glad to see you," was Mosely's welcome; "but, by shrimy Shackson, I don't seen no breachers for so long dot I don't scarcely know how to talk mit 'em. If you vos like a leedle vine, now—"

"Whisky in mine," replied the parson—"whisky plain."

"Ah, dot's der right kind of a breacher—hardshell Baptists, I reckon, hey?"

"The fact is," said the parson, "that I had trouble with my last church. A married woman, the young wife of one of the elders, seemed to be fonder of me than she was of her husband, and some people objected to that sort of thing. They objected to it so strongly that, in the language of the world's people, I had to skip the town."

"Ah, dose vimmers! dose vimmers! Dey makes trouble mit the best of us. Here's your goot health, sir, and hopin' you makes better luck as some breachers get."

"Oh, I don't complain of my luck. When the church cast me off I found it easy enough to pick up a living, provided that I wasn't too particular as to how I got it."

"But you vos a breacher yet," said Mosely.

"Of course I am, when I choose to be."

"Dot's mighty nice—to be a breacher, and a smart man, and not care for dings. Dere's blenky chances for such breachers like dose."

After this introduction and explanation the parson and Mosely got on very well together, the latter finding in the intelligence and education and evident knowledge of the world of the former much to admire and envy.

Their intimacy was extended and cemented by Mosely's discovery that the parson could play cards and was specially fond of the old-fashioned game known as seven-up, or "olt slaitch," as the innkeeper styled it.

"I been lookin' dese t'ree years," said he, "to find me somebody vot can blay olt slaitch mit me. Dot vos my shstrong holt."

It was indeed his strong hold, as Fred Henning discovered when he sat down to the game.

In all the arts of the old game, including "stacking" the cards, and turning up jacks from the bottom and other improper places, he was such an adept that Fred was "put to his trumps" in more senses than one to hold his own.

But he did hold his own, though he was out of practice with that particular game, and when he "got his hand in" he astonished the innkeeper with his skill.

Whenever the parson won a game, Mosely was jubilant.

He was so delighted at having found a man who could beat him at "olt slaitch," that he rejoiced in being beaten.

The parson so won upon him—and won from him—that he took Charley Schramm aside at a convenient opportunity, and sounded him as to the parson's true character.

"Yoost der kind of man vot ve want, Sharley," he said. "Only dick—a breacher, and a man like dot! He vos all t'rowed away as a barson. Vot dings he could vind owit, and vot shobs he could put up, on der breacher lay! Yoost der man vot ve vant, by shrimy Shackson!"

"Right you are, old man," replied the hunchback. "That's why I brought him here. He would be worth a pile to you in a business way, b'grayshus, and I shouldn't wonder if you can get him, if you go to work right."

So the "head crook" sounded the parson, giving him hints and intimations concerning his outside employment, which were favorably received by him for whose benefit they were intended, and Fred was so charmed with the innkeeper and his ways that he declared his intention of stopping a while at the Travelers' Home.

"There is only one strange thing about you, my friend," said he. "It is easy to see that you are a German; but Lewis Mosely is not a German name."

"Well, vot of dot? Dis is a vree gountry, and everybody can haf a name to suit himself."

If it vos Mosely here, or Auffner dere, or somebody else some odder where, dot vos beesness. So der money cooms in, vat makes der name?"

"That is what I believe," answered the parson. "If the money comes in, what matters anything?"

It has been said that Mosely's establishment was a stopping-place for farmers who came to town with loads of cotton and other produce.

One of them, on his way back, stopped to feed and water his mules on the evening that succeeded Flush Fred's arrival.

He was considerably exhilarated by the beverages with which the Helena barkeepers had supplied him, and exhilarated himself still further at the Travelers' Home.

Naturally he became boastful, and exhibited a pretty fat roll of money, which made Lewis Mosely's eyes glisten.

At the same time he declared his intention of driving home that night.

"Besser you vos not," remarked the innkeeper. "Maybe you get yourself stole away."

"Not while I carry this," replied the countryman as he showed a heavy revolver.

After a while he went out to look after his team, leaving his coat and his pistol in the bar-room.

Lewis Mosely examined the revolver.

When he had finished his examination it was no longer a deadly weapon.

"It would be as easy as rolling off a log to get that roll of money," suggested the parson.

"Not in mine house," replied Mosely. "Dot vould gif der Drafelers' Home a bad name, and keep dose peoples away."

He spoke to two men who had been lounging about the place, and they left the house.

The owner of the pistol soon returned to the bar-room, exhilarated himself a little further, got his coat and his weapon, and drove away.

Within less than two hours, while Mosely and the parson were deep in the mysteries of "olt slaitch," the countryman's team came rattling back to the house, and he burst in with a pitiful story.

He had been stopped on the road by two men, armed with revolvers, who had robbed him of all his money.

"What for you don't shoot 'em?" inquired the sympathetic innkeeper.

"I did snap at 'em twice; but the durned pistol wouldn't go off."

"I told you dot you besser vos shtay."

The countryman's sad story was listened to with emotion at the Travelers' Home, and he received much good advice.

Lewis Mosely kindly put him to bed up-stairs, assuring him with a great display of liberality that he would not charge him a cent for the accommodation of himself and his mules.

Before long the two men who had quietly left the bar-room came in as quietly.

Directly after their arrival the innkeeper exhibited to the parson a roll of money, similar in appearance to that which the countryman had shown.

"Vot you says vos gorrect," he remarked. "So long as der money cooms in, vot madders any odder dings?"

This was so plain and to the purpose that the two men had no difficulty in coming to an understanding.

One thing led to another, until the parson declared his desire of joining the association, and Mosely was of the opinion that there would be "no drowbles mit dot."

"To-morrow," said he, "Mr. Preston coomes here, and he vixes dings for you."

"Who is Mr. Preston?" inquired Fred.

"A young man vot is high up in dis business—a mighty shmart young feller, too. Vot Mr. Preston says is so goot like vot der boss says."

The next day brought Mr. Preston to the Travelers' Home.

He was a rather tall young man, dark-faced, and not prepossessing in features or expression, passably well dressed, but not stylishly.

In Fred Henning's opinion he did not have the appearance of a person who ought to be extensively trusted in the management of such an organization as that which he was supposed to represent.

It also seemed to Fred that the young man's voice had a somewhat familiar sound, and he was inclined to the belief that he had seen him previously; but he had met so many young men of Mr. Preston's stamp, that he took no particular notice of the impression.

Mr. Preston had a long confab with the innkeeper, and afterward entered into conversation with the parson, whose appearance seemed to strike him favorably.

"My friend Mosely has taken a strong notion to you, Mr. Sawtell," he said. "He tells me that he has given you some hints about a money-making business that some of us are engaged in, and that you want to be a partner."

"I think you would find me useful in more ways than one," replied Fred.

"I am sure that we would. From what Mosely and Charley Schramm say about you, and from what I have seen, you are just the sort of a man we want. To have a clerical gentleman among us will be, as you say, very use-

ful. I suppose you can act the parson, as well as look like one."

"Oh, yes; I am regularly licensed to preach, and all that sort of thing."

"I may have a job for you before long that will give you a chance in that way—something in the marrying line. I will go back to Tennessee and report to the boss, and Mosely will let you know when you can be a full member."

"To Tennessee!" muttered Flush Fred, after this interview was over. "He must go to Tennessee and report to the boss. I believe that I will go to Tennessee, and I may report to the boss, too!"

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE TENNESSEE TRAIL.

THE Helmsley place, as Arthur Helmsley's farm or plantation was known, for lack of a more distinctive title, was a fine estate which had been badly run down by extravagance and bad management.

It was a common saying among the neighbors that it was a good thing for the property that Arthur's father died, as he would have left nothing of it if he had lived much longer.

What he did leave to his son was an encumbered estate and the family feud with the Fowles, an expensive lawsuit being connected with the feud.

Arthur devoted himself mainly to economy and hard work, endeavoring to make the plantation yield a good support for his mother and sister, and to clear off the mortgages and other claims.

It is true that he had also inherited his father's fancy for games of chance; but he fancied that he might get money in that way more rapidly than by hard work.

His experience with Flush Fred had cured him of that delusion.

Arthur's widowed mother was a good and lovable woman, but not strong-minded by any means.

His sister Kate, a bright and very pretty brunette, was intelligent and vivacious, active and industrious, a ready seconder of all Arthur's efforts, and his unwavering admirer.

"Who is that friend of yours, Arthur, who is coming to visit you?" asked Mrs. Helmsley one morning.

"Henning is his name—Fred Henning."

"I think I heard you say to Kate that he is a river gambler."

"That is his profession, I admit—if it can be called a profession."

"Mercy on us! How can you do it, my son? Think of your poor father. The money he lost by gambling would make us all comfortable now."

"I don't gamble, mother."

"But such associates might draw you into it. Our habits depend largely upon the company we keep."

"There is no danger that I will lose anything by Fred Henning."

"But is he exactly a proper person to bring into your home?" persisted Mrs. Helmsley.

"Is he fitting company for a young girl like Kate?"

"I think, mother, that you ought to be acquainted with Kate by this time. In my opinion she is abundantly able to take care of herself, and her sound sense and good principles are always to be trusted. As for myself, I may say that Fred Henning has done me more good than any man living. I might have squandered money in gambling if he had not effectually stopped that leak, and I owe him a debt of gratitude greater than I can tell you for the service he has rendered me."

"Arthur is quite right about that," said Kate Helmsley. "He has told me all about it, and I agree with him in his good opinion of Mr. Henning, whom I will be glad to welcome as a friend."

"If you are both of the same opinion, you can't be far wrong," replied the widow, a little querulously. "You seem, by the way, to have more confidence in each other than you have in your mother. But you may be sure that any person who has done a service to my son will be a friend of mine, and I will also be glad to welcome Mr. Henning."

Fred Henning arrived, and was more than kindly received by the family of three.

Mrs. Helmsley soon forgot her prejudices in her enjoyment of his bright and intelligent conversation, and Kate, who had been prepared to admire her brother's friend, found a real delight in his companionship, quite outside of any considerations that pertained to Arthur.

Flush Fred passed his time very pleasantly on the plantation, not seeking any victims to devour, but simply taking his ease and enjoying himself.

But he was, at times, a little uneasy and out of sorts.

He had undertaken an enterprise, concerning which he was perplexed and doubtful—not at all sure that it would pay him for his pains, and wondering whether it was not too Quixotic for such a matter-of-fact man as himself.

There was an element of hazard in it, too, which he did not fail to appreciate.

Was it worth while for him to put his life in peril to gain an end that could be of no special service to himself?

It was true that John Munford had threatened to kill him, and doubtless intended to execute his threat some day. It might be well to foretell the efforts of his enemy; but how far would he be justified in going to meet a danger which he did not really dread?

He had decided when in Arkansas that he would "go to Tennessee and report to the boss"—meaning that he would visit John Munford in his assumed character of the parson, and dive deeper into the secrets of that man's life.

But he began to feel as if he might back out of the engagement he had made with himself.

His days of ease and pleasure with the Helmsleys were telling on him, and he was decidedly of the opinion that the society of Kate Helmsley was preferable to that of John Munford.

He and Arthur exchanged confidences; but those of the young planter were somewhat freer and more open than those of his friend.

"I suppose you are no longer jealous of me because I fell in love with Ella Fowle," said Fred. "You needn't be, as I have already forgotten my fancy for her, and am dead in love with your sister."

"Kate is a fine girl," remarked Arthur, a little coolly.

"Oh, you needn't fret at what I say. That is only a form of speech, meaning that I admire her immensely. I see young ladies who suit my notion of what young ladies ought to be, and know that they can never be anything to me; but I fall in love with them, just the same."

"That is all right, Fred. I understand you quite well."

"By the way, my boy, have you seen Miss Fowle lately?"

"I must confess that I see her now and then. I say that I confess, because it really seems to be rather mean and underhanded; but her father is so unreasonable, and young people who love each other ought to have some rights."

"Of course they ought. Is Colonel Fowle as bitterly opposed to you as ever?"

"Fully. There has been no change in him, except that he has lately been moody and depressed. He has been robbed more than once, and has sustained some serious losses. His financial condition was none too favorable, and now I am afraid that he is badly crippled. I understand that he has been borrowing money pretty heavily from a man named Munford."

"Munford?" exclaimed Fred, who was always wide awake at the mention of that name. "What Munford?"

"John Munford. Do you know him?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"No; I have not yet met him. It is not long since he came into this neighborhood, having bought the Withington farm, and he is often absent."

"Arthur, that John Munford is the man who wanted to kill me in Cairo, when you saved my life."

"The deuce you say!" cried Arthur, who was thoroughly wide awake at that statement.

"It is a fact, unless I am greatly mistaken. I have been making some discoveries about him lately, too, that are highly interesting; but I can't let you into them yet. The fact is, Arthur, that I have undertaken a contract with which that man is concerned—but that is enough. It is a secret, and I must keep it even from you."

Arthur declared that it was too bad to excite his curiosity, and then refuse to gratify it.

"I am sorry I said any thing about it, my boy. There is danger mixed with the contract I spoke of, and I shall surely refuse to drag you into it, for your sister's sake, if not for your own."

"But that man's son is the fellow who was troubling Ella when you came to her rescue!"

"I know it, Arthur, and I remember his telling her that her father was on his side. That is one point, and there are others. Do those Munfords visit at Colonel Fowle's?"

"I understand that they are there pretty frequently."

"Just so, and John Munford has been often absent from the neighborhood, and Colonel Fowle has been robbed, and he has had heavy losses, and Munford has sent him money, and Munford's son wants to marry his daughter. Wait until I can piece these things together."

"I hope you will not be long about it, Fred. I can guess at a part of your meaning, and I insist upon it that you shall let me know your whole meaning as soon as you reasonably can."

"I promise you that. And now I must leave your house, and go over and pay a visit at Colonel Fowle's. If he presses me to stay I may be there several days."

"If you want to be well received, Fred, you had better not let him know that you came from here."

"I will keep that to myself, of course."

"Had you not better give it up? You will be likely to meet John Munford there."

"I have no objection to that."

"He may make another attempt upon your life, and perhaps succeed."

"Let him try it. When I know where to find him, I also know how to meet him. I promise you, Arthur, that I will do all I can to serve your interests over there."

CHAPTER XVI.

"I WILL SEE YOU HUNG."

At Colonel Fowle's place the master of the house was in low spirits, the mistress was worried, Ella was distressed, and there was an air of gloom and uneasiness over the entire plantation.

Flush Fred, however, was cordially received there, if not joyfully, and his presence seemed to ease and brighten the family for the moment.

For his part he was glad to perceive that Mrs. Fowle and Ella showed no signs of resentment or any ill-feeling toward him, but appeared to regard him as a friend and benefactor, rather than as a person who had nearly deprived them of a husband and father.

Yet he could not help remembering that act, and the remembrance made him very deferential toward them both, and at the same time anxious to do something to lighten the burden that so evidently weighed upon them.

It was not long after his arrival that Ella, who had been out on the front porch, came in with a decided frown on her face.

"What is the matter, Ella?" asked her mother.

"Those Munfords are coming here—both of them."

"Please remember that they are my friends," said the colonel. "I am under obligations to Mr. Munford, too. I hope, Ella, that you will receive them in a friendly manner."

"I will try to," she answered.

Flush Fred felt that their arrival at that time was something in the nature of a crisis for him; but he was prepared to meet it.

He looked at them through the window as they rode up and dismounted, and easily recognized the man who had proclaimed himself his bitter enemy.

He also recognized the young man, considerably to his surprise.

It was surely a young man whom he had met when he was masquerading as the parson, who had gone to the bad.

It was the young man of Helena, who had gone back to Tennessee to "report to the boss."

It was Mr. Preston.

There could be no doubt, then, that John Munford was "the boss," and that his son was "Mr. Preston."

"Would they recognize him?" thought Fred.

Of course the father would recognize him as Fred Henning, and he had no fear that the son would perceive in Fred Henning the Rev. Samuel Sawtell.

The disguise that had deceived George Dace and his friends might be depended on.

He greatly preferred the recognition of the father to that of the son, as he was by no means ready to disclose the double part he had been playing.

He rose to meet them when they came in, and the ordeal was soon over.

John Munford was evidently surprised, and disagreeably so, at meeting his enemy there.

His face turned red, and the frown on his brow clearly indicated his displeasure.

Fred Henning was introduced to them, and the father acknowledged the introduction by a cold and distant bow.

Fred also bowed stiffly.

Of course that was not a time or place for open hostilities.

Colonel Fowle perceived this coldness, and naturally supposed that it was caused by the remembrance of Fred's rough encounter with young Munford when the former first met Ella Fowle.

He hastened to smooth over that matter.

"I hope, Munford," said he, "that you and Pressley will have no grudge against my friend Henning on account of that little affair in which he interfered under a misapprehension."

"No grudge at all," answered John Munford. "It was all a mistake, as has been explained to your satisfaction."

"Just so. I have not yet had a chance to explain to Henning that it was a mistake; but that is what it was—a mistake of Ella's as to the intentions of this young gentleman."

"I am glad to learn that it was a mistake," replied Fred, "and I hope the young gentleman will accept my apologies."

The young gentleman did accept them, though not very cheerfully, and remarked that there was something so familiar to him in Mr. Henning's voice and appearance, that he thought he must have met that gentleman somewhere.

"That is quite probable," answered Fred. "If you ever travel you are likely to have met me on the river or elsewhere."

Fred had freely offered his apologies—although Ella Fowle looked strangely at him when he did so—for good reasons of his own.

He was as gracious as possible toward both the Munfords, because he knew that he could gain nothing by putting them on their guard against him.

His only chance to disarm them and discover their secrets lay in getting them to act and talk at their ease in his presence.

Colonel Fowle soon made excuses for himself and John Munford, whom he withdrew to his private room for a business conversation, leaving the young people with Mrs. Fowle in the sitting-room.

If Pressley Munford had come there for the purpose of wooing Ella, he had precious little opportunity to do so in the presence of Mrs. Fowle and Fred Henning.

It was probable that he would not have succeeded much better in their absence, as the young lady treated him quite coolly, and made but the briefest replies to his attempts at familiar conversation.

Fred Henning was quite sure that the courting, if any, must be done by one of the men in the private room.

When John Munford came out with Colonel Fowle, he sent his son away presumably on an errand, and Ella was relieved to that extent.

The father remained a little while longer, and when he left, Flush Fred made an excuse for going out, and followed him to his horse, overtaking him as he was about to mount.

"Why have you followed me?" angrily demanded John Munford.

"I merely wanted to ask you," pleasantly replied Fred, "whether you are still in the notion of killing me?"

Fred expected an affirmative answer, accompanied by action, and was prepared to meet it promptly.

"No—I am out of that notion."

"Thank you. As I may remain in this neighborhood a while, it is natural that I should want that point settled."

"When I say that I am out of that notion," remarked Munford, "I mean that I am sure you are bound to be hung, as you have often deserved to be, and that I will live to see you hung. I have concluded to wait for that."

"And that will be satisfactory to you, I suppose. Very well, sir. I prefer the chance of being hung to the certainty of being shot. When I am hung I hope you will be there to see the performance."

"You may be sure that I will," growled Munford, as he mounted and rode away.

When Fred returned to the house he was taken to task by Ella Fowle, who had been watching him jealously.

"You seem to be quite friendly with those Munfords," said she.

"I think it best to be so," he answered.

"That is a little strange, Mr. Henning, since you must know as well as I do that what my father speaks of as a mistake was no mistake at all."

"I am quite sure that there was no mistake about it, and yet I prefer to be friendly with both of those men. But I want you to believe, Miss Ella, that however I may behave toward them, or whatever I may have to do with them, I am always looking out for your interests, and for those of Arthur Helmsley."

Ella blushed at the mention of that name, and also opened her eyes wide.

"Do you know him, then?" she asked.

"I do, and he is my particular friend."

"Then you may rest assured that I believe you and trust you."

In the evening Colonel Fowle and his guest, separating themselves from the rest of the family, had a private chat while one smoked a cigar and the other a corn cob pipe.

The colonel was not at first disposed to be very confidential concerning his own affairs; but he soon thawed under the genial manner of his friend, and began to complain of his losses and recount them.

Flush Fred became deeply interested in those losses, and brought to bear upon them keenness and shrewdness which a criminal lawyer might have envied.

Concerning the missing and unrecorded mortgage he asked substantially the same questions that Mrs. Fowle had asked her husband, and was interested in learning that John Munford had been present when the paper was laid in the desk-drawer.

He was also interested in knowing that the borrower had been introduced by John Munford, and that his name was Huffner.

Flush Fred, who was not given to forgetting things, remembered so slight a circumstance as the mention of the name of Huffner as one of Lewis Mosely's possible aliases.

"But you may settle the matter, colonel," he suggested. "If Huffner is an honest man, there ought to be no trouble about that."

"Of course he is honest. John Munford has vouched for that. But I am afraid that the settlement will be a slow matter. I wrote to Helena as soon as the loss was discovered."

"Have you got no answer yet?" inquired Fred.

"An answer came at last from another man, saying that Huffner had gone to Missouri to look after a lead mine. Here is the letter."

Fred Henning read the letter, which was brief, and opened his eyes when he came to the signature.

It was signed "Lewis Mosely."

Mosely wrote the English language considerably better than he was in the habit of talking it; but the letter was unquestionably that of a German.

Fred was convinced that both the mortgage and its theft were parts of a "put-up job" on the part of John Munford to rob Colonel Fowle and cripple him.

He was also sure that the colonel would never recover his money from the alleged Huffner.

But he made no mention of his convictions to the victim of the conspiracy.

The time had not come for telling what he knew of John Munford, and it might not be easy to bring Colonel Fowle to his opinion.

The stealing of the horse and the burning of the gin-house were next discussed, and Fred did not fail to notice the close connection of John Munford with both of those calamities.

"Of course the horse was stolen," he said. "I wish you would describe him to me."

The colonel described Nero as a very dark bay, nearly black, with a blaze on his forehead, and the off hind-foot white.

"Had he any tricks or peculiarities?"

"He had one, but you may be sure that I never spoke of it to anybody who wanted to buy him. He would never trot without a check-rein, and it had to be tightened up pretty well."

"That could scarcely be called a defect," observed Fred. "As the horse is a fine trotter, and as I mix considerably with racing men, I may see him or hear of him."

The colonel also informed his guest that John Munford had stood by him in the distress that had followed his losses, and had advanced him a considerable sum of money when it was sorely needed.

"To be sure, he is well secured," continued Colonel Fowle. "He has a chattel mortgage on the best of my niggers, and the loan has but a short time to run. If I should not be able to pay it when it is due, he will of course renew it."

Flush Fred was by no means so sure of that, and the conversation deepened his conviction that Colonel Fowle's affairs were in a bad way, with no visible prospect of improvement.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

THE information he received at Colonel Fowle's, and the convictions that were forced upon him there, decided Fred Henning against backing out of the "contract" which he had vaguely mentioned to Arthur Helmsley.

What he had begun as a freak, or as a matter of personal enmity, he was prepared to persist in as a sacred duty.

Personal enmity no longer had anything to do with it, as it was no longer worth while to fore-stall the efforts of his foe.

John Munford had assured him that it was his present intention to wait and see him hanged.

Flush Fred was also content to await that undesirable event.

At the same time he had a suspicion that his adversary might be the first to try the virtue of hemp.

It was because he believed that he could see through the designs of John Munford so well, and because he was anxious to help those at whom the designs were aimed, that he determined to persist in the "contract."

In his opinion, he was under a deep obligation to Arthur Helmsley, who had saved his life, and to Ella Fowle, upon whom he had come so near inflicting a terrible injury.

Added to this was the excitement of pursuit, the detective instinct that was born in him, and his natural craving for adventure.

In order to carry out the "contract," he considered it necessary to visit John Munford at his home, as he had purposed doing when he came to Tennessee.

This could only be done, of course, in the character of the parson who had gone to the bad.

So he cut short his visit at Colonel Fowle's, and returned to the Helmsley plantation.

Arthur Helmsley's curiosity had grown upon him until it had become anxiety, and he was eager to know what discoveries Flush Fred had made concerning John Munford.

Fred consented to explain to him a portion of those discoveries, and in general terms, after he had secured a promise from Arthur that he would not say a word about them to any person, and would do nothing respecting them without the advice and consent of his friend.

"It is my belief," he said—"and I assure you that I have good reason for it—that it is John Munford who has been crippling my friend Fowle, and at the same time getting him into his power by lending him money on short time and hard terms. This, as you may suppose, is because he wants Colonel Fowle's daughter to marry his son."

"As Ella is bitterly and teetotally opposed to that match, his only chance is to exert such a pressure upon her father, and through him upon the family, as shall force her to come to terms."

"Why don't you explain this to Colonel Fowle, and put him on his guard against Munford?" inquired Arthur.

"Because he would not believe my conclusions, no matter how well they are grounded, and I have nothing but conclusions. I am not yet in a position to put the facts before him so plainly and strongly that he can't deny them; but I hope to be."

"What do you hope to find out?"

"I have already found out something about John Munford; but I want to get hold of proofs—solid and substantial facts—such as will send him whirling out of the country or into the State prison. But this is a dead secret, Arthur."

"I wish I could be in it and help you."

"But you can't. In fact, I can't help myself, but must call on another man to help me. That is to say, I am going to visit the Munfords tomorrow, but shall go in disguise."

"I am afraid, Fred, that you are putting yourself in peril for my sake."

"There is no danger, not yet, at least."

"John Munford may forget that he has changed his mind, and conclude to kill you."

"He won't know me from Adam's off ox when I am ready to meet him. Come up to my room early in the morning, Arthur—very early—as I must be away from here by daylight."

"Without your breakfast?"

"I want to get away from here without being seen in my disguise, and can't bother about breakfast."

Early in the morning Arthur was in his friend's room, and was surprised at the change that had been made in his personal appearance by the parson's "rig," which he had exhumed from his capacious carpet-sack.

He did not recognize Fred Henning in the Rev. Samuel Sawtell.

"You see that I am all right," said Fred. "Now I want you to send me away from here quietly, and make the best excuse you can for me to your mother and sister. I shan't see you again here, as I shall go on to Memphis from Munford's. If anything should go particularly wrong here, drop me a line or telegraph me. Here is my Memphis address. I may not be there, but will be found as soon as possible. And, Arthur, above all things, I want you to remember and mind every caution I have given you."

Young Helmsley promised to do so, and the two friends separated with a hearty hand-clasp.

Flush Fred felt no misgivings as to his reception at the home of his enemy.

Like Byron's youth in the Chillon prison, he was "formed to combat with his kin," and in the delicate and dangerous enterprise which he had undertaken, he found a positive pleasure.

The Munfords, father and son, were both at home when he reached the house, and were not a little surprised at seeing him there at that time.

But that was nothing to Flush Fred, whose easy and devil-may-care style at once forced a way for him into their affections.

He did not need to introduce himself, as he immediately recognized Pressley Munford as "Mr. Preston," and hailed him by that name.

So all the necessary explanations were given by the young man, who spoke warmly of the good—meaning the bad—character of the ex-parson.

"As I happened to be in this neighborhood," said Fred, "and as Mosely had told me where to find you, I thought I might as well look in and let you know who and what I am."

"That is right," replied John Munford. "As Press has said, you seem to be just the kind of man we want, and you come well recommended. When you get back to Helena you will find everything straight for you, and I think there will soon be a rich job ready in which you can take a hand. I will give you a line to Huffner—Mosely, I mean."

Fred found the Munford mansion in no important particulars different from the ordinary farm-houses of that region, except that there were no white persons in or about the place besides the proprietor and his son, and but few colored servants. The "niggers" who were in sight seemed to have been picked from among the lowest and most vicious of their class.

The farm was kept up and cultivated after a fashion; but the visitor suspected that this was for the purpose of a blind, rather than for profit.

"You see how we are here," said John Munford. "Everything straight and square and respectable. Nothing here that a sheriff or even a sharp detective could find fault with. Just an old-fashioned farm-house—that's all. But I've got a big and fine cellar under here that I don't allow anybody to see. It was made by my own niggers, under my own direction, and a mighty good and useful piece of work it is."

Fred Henning would gladly have taken a look at that cellar; but he was not sufficiently intimate with the Munfords to hint at his desire, and he was not invited to inspect it.

So he contented himself with making a mental memorandum of its existence and the probable object of its existence.

Before he left the house, the Rev. Mr. Sawtell was obliged to listen to severe strictures upon the character of one Fred Henning, whom John Munford had recently met, greatly to his surprise and displeasure, at the house of a friend in the neighborhood.

That Fred Henning, as John Munford described him, was such a consummate scoundrel, and a "monster of such hideous mien," that hanging would be entirely too good for him.

It was simply astonishing that a respectable planter like Colonel Fowle, should associate with such a fellow, and admit him to the society of his wife and daughter.

"Perhaps your friend don't know what kind of a man he is," suggested the parson.

"If he don't, he will soon find out. I will tell him who it is that he allows to visit his family, and he sha'n't have the excuse of ignorance to offer."

"Perhaps you have a grudge against the man?" observed the parson.

"I have, and had sworn to kill him, but have decided, as I told him, to wait and see him hung. If he don't come to the end of a rope in one way, he will in another. Some day, if he ventures into this neighborhood again, he will be found swinging from one of the black-jacks or post-oaks about here."

If the Rev. Mr. Sawtell had been acquainted with that rascally Fred Henning, he would surely have advised him to be careful how he ventured into the neighborhood in which Mr. John Munford was a prominent citizen.

As the case stood, he coincided with the views of his host, and accepted the hospitality of the Munford mansion until the next morning, when Pressley Munford drove him over to the railroad station.

On the way he extracted no important information from the young man, except that Pressley spoke of his infatuation for Ella Fowle, and declared his intention of making her his wife.

"She hasn't come around yet," he remarked; "but the old man will fix that. I tell you, parson, the boss is the man to tie to, if you want money, or anything done. Stick to the boss, and he will stick to you."

The parson vowed that he desired nothing better than to stick to the boss until the hottest portion of the universe should freeze over, and took an affectionate leave of his young comrade at the railway station.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CRISIS UP THE COUNTRY.

THE volunteer investigator had not gained much by his visit to John Munford, and yet he had gained quite as much as he could reasonably have expected.

He had at least gained a step forward, and had made sure of his connection with the "association" that owned John Munford as its "boss," without which connection he could scarcely hope to accomplish anything.

He had also settled the point that in his character of the parson he need not fear being recognized by John Munford as Fred Henning, and that fact emboldened him to go on.

At Memphis he went to a room which he kept as his permanent abode, though he seldom used it, and which was always in order for him.

Then he put aside the parson's "rig," and issued forth as Fred Henning.

He also resumed the character of a roaring lion, going about and seeking whom he might devour.

The fact was that he needed money.

His Quixotic enterprise, though it was interesting, and though he expected it to be even more useful than it was interesting, was productive of an outflow of cash, rather than an influx of that precious commodity, and it was one of Flush Fred's fixed opinions that a man without a dollar had better be a dead man.

He had but one way to accumulate dollars, and that was by his skill at cards.

As he did not wish to spare the time for a river trip just then, he was obliged to seek his victims in the city, and necessarily among the members of his own profession and the skilled amateurs who did not differ much from the professionals.

Both of those classes fought shy of him, and his success was not very notable, chiefly because of a lack of subjects to operate on.

While he was thus engaged, he was also endeavoring to perfect a scheme to "beat the bank" at faro.

This is the great object of the professional gambler's ambition—the main purpose of his existence.

It is the dream of his life to invent a style of playing against the bank, at which the bank shall invariably lose, notwithstanding its invariable percentage.

For this he preys upon the public whenever he can get hold of it; for this he journeys into remote regions, and fleeces unsuspecting strangers.

He inevitably returns to the faro bank, and devotes his profits to the development of his "system," and the faro dealer rakes them in.

Flush Fred had a "system," which he had been a long time developing and improving.

He had lost much money by it, but held to his belief in the system, as some people persist in believing in the possibility of perpetual motion.

While he was diving for ducats in Memphis he occasionally tried his system, until he believed he had "got it down fine," and that all he needed was money enough to give it a chance, and a bank of sufficient capital to accommodate him.

He was going home one evening, to examine his system for the last time, and to put the finishing touches to it, when he ran against Arthur Helmsley.

The surprise was mutual, and so was the pleasure; but Arthur's gratification was the more unrestrained.

"I am immensely glad to see you, Fred," said he. "There is no man living whom I would be better pleased to meet just now. But I had not hoped for the good luck of finding you."

"Anything up?" inquired Fred, who could easily see that his friend was in trouble.

"Yes, indeed. Matters up my way have come to a crisis, and the worst kind of trouble has set in."

"That means John Munford, of course. What has he been doing?"

"You know that he had loaned Colonel Fowle money. It seems that the sum was five thousand dollars—more than I had supposed it was. As you told me, it was lent on short time and hard terms. The colonel gave him a chattel mortgage on several of his best bands, with a power of sale in case of default of payment.

"When the debt became due, of course the colonel was unable to pay it, and his credit is so bad that he can't borrow a dollar any more. He had supposed that Munford would extend the time; but that was just where he made the biggest kind of a mistake."

"Then John Munford came forward with a proposition for settlement."

"He offered to let the debt go, and to call it square, if Ella Fowle would marry his son."

"The colonel had no particular objection to that; but he knew that Ella objected to it most decidedly, and so he told the man."

"You must make her come to it," replied Munford, and the colonel went to his daughter, and made a clean breast of his business.

"Ella was terribly distressed, of course; but she utterly refused to marry Press Munford, no matter what might happen."

"The colonel reported this to his creditor, who told him very plainly that the marriage must come off within the ten days' grace allowed by the mortgage, or the colonel's negroes would be sold out."

"That, you know, meant nothing short of ruin to him."

"All this was fearfully hard on Ella. It seemed that she must become the wife of a man she hated, or be regarded by her father as the cause of his calamities."

"So she came to me for advice, and I hurried off to Memphis to borrow money to meet the debt, though I don't suppose the colonel would take it from me if I got it."

"But I have had no success worth speaking of. My personal credit amounts to very little here, and though I might raise the amount by a mortgage on my farm, there are legal difficulties that would prevent me from getting it in time to stop the sale. So I am glad that I have met you, and my last hope is that you will be able to suggest something."

Flush Fred had listened to the narration as if it was just what he had expected to hear, and at its close he was ready with his suggestion.

"How much money have you got, Arthur?"

"About five hundred dollars."

"Nearly as much as I have. Will you trust yours to me, to do as I please with?"

"I will trust you in anything and everything. Why do you ask?"

"I might go up there," answered Fred, "and scare John Munford out of what he proposes to do; but I am not ready for that yet. It would break up the plan I have formed, and I must not do that unless it is absolutely necessary."

"What can be done, then?"

"The best thing will be to pay the money."

"To pay the money? You don't mean to say that you have got that much?"

"No; but I hope to get it to-night."

"How?"

"I am going to break the bank."

Arthur Helmsley was bewildered. Nothing less than visions of burglary arose in his mind.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"It is a faro bank that I am going to break, or try to. I have been at work on a system to play against the bank, and believe that it is all right now. I am going to risk your money and mine on it, and make or break. If I should fail—that is, if my science or my luck should prove to be too weak, I can go up into the country and see how John Munford will scare."

CHAPTER XIX.

BREAKING A BANK.

ARTHUR HELMSLEY had implicit confidence in his friend, and at once assented to his proposition, as if it had been nothing but an ordinary business operation that he proposed to undertake.

Fred Henning led him directly to Richey & Winn's establishment.

This was a faro game that was run by two well known men, who opened it every night with an announced, and doubtless assured, capital of ten thousand dollars.

The capital named formed the limit of the betting, and if it should be exhausted, the bank was "broke" for the night, no matter how much money the proprietors might have behind it.

Before going up-stairs, Fred halted, and spoke to his friend.

"Of course you are going in with me, Arthur, and while I am playing you must pray for me. No, I don't mean that. Luck at faro, I reckon, is not exactly the correct thing to pray for. But you must wish me well, for Ella Fowle's sake, and keep on wishing."

As they went up-stairs they encountered a white cat, which mewed, and rubbed against Fred's legs as he passed it.

"I am all right now!" he joyfully exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" asked Arthur, who began to believe that his friend had gone crazy.

"Did you see that cat? She was clear white—not a black spot on her. And she spoke to me. That is a sure sign of good luck. Come on, Arthur! I am in a hurry to try my fortune."

There were several men in the faro room when the two friends entered it; but only two or three of them were playing in a small way.

When Fred Henning came in, it was plain from the way he went to work that he meant business.

He spoke to one of his acquaintances there, who stationed himself near the case-keeper, and to another, who placed himself in a position to watch the dealer.

None of them had a suspicion that the proprietors were anything but fair; but Fred Henning meant to play a big game, and the temptation might be great, and it was well to take precautions.

"I'm going for your pile," he said to the dealer as he took his seat.

This was a notice that he meant to try to break the bank, and at the same time a notice that it would not be healthy to play anything but a square game against him.

The dealer smiled as Fred took out a paper on which he had marked the exact course that he intended to pursue, this being the "system" on which he had expended so much thought and money.

The dealer knew that nobody had yet succeeded in breaking his bank, and experience had given him a contempt for systems.

The few who were playing abandoned their amusement, and all the men in the room stood or seated themselves near the table to watch Fred Henning and his big game.

If there had been any doubt as to whether he meant business, it would have been dispelled by the style in which he laid one hundred dollars on the king.

He lost, doubled his bet, and changed to another card on which he won.

Again he doubled, changed again, and lost.

Again he doubled and changed, and won.

Helmsley began to grow pale when his friend went back to his bet of one hundred dollars on the king, which he lost.

But Fred kept on doubling, changing and winning, until his gains amounted to four thousand dollars.

Then the dealer opened his eyes widely, and Arthur Helmsley's face was red with excitement.

The bystanders, too, were becoming excited, and crowded to the table more closely.

Again the "scinded" player went down in the scale of betting, beginning with one hundred dollars, and he again began to double and change, always referring to the paper that he held in his hand.

So he went on until he had five thousand dollars, the amount of his "pile" at the time, placed on the king.

Then the game became intensely exciting.

There was but one more king to come out of the box at that deal, as all in the room knew, with the possible exception of Arthur Helmsley, and the question was whether it would fall on the side of the bank, or on that of the player.

So many eager eyes of skilled faroists were fastened on the dealer, that there was no chance for him to cheat if he wished to.

He probably had no thought of cheating, and not a muscle of his face moved as he monotonously dealt the cards.

Flush Fred was a little pale, but gave no other evidence of emotion as he steadily watched the dealer.

Arthur Helmsley's hand shook as it rested on his friend's chair; but neither he nor any other person in the room uttered a word, and nothing

could be heard but the dropping of the cards as they fell into their places.

The eagerly expected king came out.

Flush Fred won!

"The bank is closed," said the dealer.

He paid the successful player the amount of his winnings, put away the cards and chips, and folded up the "lay-out."

Fred Henning left the house with Helmsley.

"That was a great stroke," said Arthur. "I suppose you have perfect confidence in your system now."

"I don't know that I have," replied Fred. "I have perfect confidence in the white cat. The system didn't get a fair trial, as the white cat was sure to bring me luck, anyhow. So there's no telling whether it was luck or the system that raked the pile. But I've got it, and that point is settled."

He took Arthur to his room, where he locked the door, put the money in a pile on the table, and sorted it out.

"This will make things square," said he— "at least for the present. Here is your five hundred, Arthur, and here is Colonel Fowle's five thousand, and I believe I will claim the rest. You had better stay here with me tonight, my boy, as it is getting late, and it will be best for both of us to guard this money."

"Are you afraid of thieves, Fred?"

"Not afraid of them; but it is as well to be on the safe side, as I wouldn't lose this money now for twice the amount at another time. It would take a pretty smart set of thieves, though, to get it away from two of us."

They examined their revolvers, placed them within easy reach, and slept the sleep of the just, bothered by no burglarious alarms.

"How are we to get the money to Colonel Fowle?" was the question that Arthur prodded in the morning.

"That is easy enough," answered his friend.

"I fail to see how it is easy. You don't want to go up there now, and he would never think of taking it from me, and if I should give it to Ella, that would not help the case."

"I have thought of that, my boy. We will get Aunt Cynthy to take it to him."

"Who is she?"

"An old fortune-teller here. She used to belong to Colonel Fowle, but bought her freedom. She will be glad to take it, and I will send him a note that will make him feel easy, I hope."

This is the note that Flush Fred wrote:

"MY DEAR COLONEL FOWLE:—

"I have just happened to hear that you are in trouble for want of a few thousand dollars.

"As I have a little money by me which I have no use for, and which I would be glad to invest securely for awhile, I take the liberty of sending it to you by Aunt Cynthy, hoping that you will favor me by borrowing it.

"I shall have to charge you eight per cent, as that is about the current rate of interest, and I enclose a note which you may sign and hand to Aunt Cynthy, if the time named is not too short.

"Hoping that you and your family are enjoying good health, and with many thanks for past favors from you all, I remain,

"Yours very truly,

"FRED HENNING."

"That is about the ticket, I reckon," remarked Fred, who prided himself upon his ability as a letter-writer.

Arthur was of the opinion that the letter was quite the correct thing, and they took it with the money to Aunt Cynthy, who cheerfully accepted the mission.

She set out for Colonel Fowle's plantation, escorted by Arthur Helmsley, and Fred Henning prepared himself for a visit to Helena.

CHAPTER XX.

A HORSE-RACE AT HELENA.

WHEN the Rev. Samuel Sawtell returned to Helena he was cordially welcomed back, not only by Lewis Mosely, but by "Mr. Preston," who had brought from Tennessee the credentials that entitled the parson to become a member of the "association."

But it may be doubted whether any person there was so glad to see him as was Charley Schramm.

"I have been having the worst kind of a deal since you left here," said the hunchback. "Those cusses want to put off all the rough and dirty work on me, b'grayshus, and I don't get enough out of 'em to keep a dog alive. I wish you could find some way for me to back out of it, b'grayshus, and save my neck."

"Don't fret about that," replied Fred. "You will come out of it all right before long, I promise you; just wait a little while."

He "staked" the hunchback liberally, and Charley's confidence in his friend and in fortune was renewed.

It happened that the parson's arrival just then was peculiarly fortunate, as a big horse-race was to come off.

The race was to be a "put-up job" by which the confederates expected to fleece the citizens of Helena and the surrounding country pretty severely, and in this undertaking they counted on the parson to render efficient aid.

"There is a man who lives a little way from here, named Rule," explained Mr. Preston, "who claims to have the fastest horse in these

parts, and I suppose he is the fastest, as he has beaten everything that has been brought forward any where near Helena.

"Rule has a standing challenge out, and Mosely and I have taken it up for a horse that we have brought down from Tennessee, and the race is to be run to-morrow for a purse of one thousand dollars.

"We have a dead sure thing of it, as we know that our horse can trot away from Rule's flyer without half trying, and the only thing we have to look after is to get as many bets on him as possible, so as to make our pile a big one.

"What we want you to do is to help us out with the betting, and you can do that well enough, being a stranger here, and a parson at that.

"We want you to go around among the people to-morrow, and talk our horse down, so as to work them up to betting, and make the odds favorable to us. Of course, you must back your opinions by betting against him; but don't make big bets—a number of small ones will be the correct thing. Do you understand?"

The parson did understand, and was ready to undertake the contract.

"Do you want any money?" inquired Mr. Preston.

The parson did not want any money, but would like to take a look at the horse.

Mention of the fact that the trotter had been brought down from Tennessee had awakened a recent memory.

The horse was brought out and shown to him, and proved to be a splendid animal.

He was a very dark bay, nearly black, with a blaze on his forehead, and one white foot.

As Fred Henning had suspected, he was Nero, the horse that had been stolen from Colonel Fowle.

He was not astonished at the confidence of the confederates in the ability of the Tennessee trotter to beat the Arkansas horse.

Nero was sure to do it unless something should happen.

But something might happen.

The parson was strongly inclined to the opinion that something would happen.

When he had discovered that the horse answered to Colonel Fowle's description of Nero, he was more than willing to meet the expectations of Mosely and Mr. Preston.

In fact, he was prepared to go a little further.

The next morning the crowds that assembled testified to the excitement which the event had aroused, and to the interest that had been carefully worked up by the confederates.

The race-track, though well located, was not skillfully laid out; but it had served the purpose of the "quarter horses" of the neighborhood, and was presumed to be good enough for the coming trot.

When Nero was brought out and exhibited, under the pressure of a demand from the crowd, the betting began in earnest.

The horse showed to such advantage as compared with the slight form and underbred appearance of Farmer Rule's mare, Jennie, that he easily found backers, and even the boastful Rule was cautious about increasing his stake by betting on the mare.

Then it was that the parson put in his fine work.

He circulated among the crowd, making disparaging remarks concerning Nero, and throwing out whispered insinuations in disapproval of that noble animal.

He had known the horse in Tennessee, he said, and admitted that he was fast; but he had the reputation of being unreliable.

As he was ready to back his opinion with his money, he was respectfully listened to, and his work soon had a visible effect upon the betting.

He did more than this.

Making the acquaintance of Farmer Rule, he rejoiced the heart of that worthy man, by entrusting him with the lump sum of one thousand dollars to bet against the Tennessee horse, and Mr. Rule hastened to invest it.

Sauntering up to where the horses were being made ready for the race, the parson encountered "Mr. Preston," who was to drive Nero.

Lewis Mosely was also there, and both were jubilant over the prospect of making a big speculation out of the race.

"You have done nobly, parson," said the young man. "They have been betting right lively since you began to talk them up, and even old man Rule has come forward with an even thousand."

"It will be a big thing for you," remarked the parson. "I hope you will count me in."

"Of course we will. We stand to win a big pile, and you shall have your share."

The parson was about the horses when they were ready to start, and easily contrived to cut Nero's check-rein nearly in two with his sharp penknife.

The word was given as the horses went over the line together, and the start was watched with intense anxiety by all, whether they had money pending on the result or not.

As the driver of the Rule nag let the mare out "for all she was worth," she easily took the lead; but that did not affect the betting.

Mr. Preston sat erect, with a confident smile on his face, holding Nero in by a steady strain, and leaving scarcely any doubt in the minds of the spectators that he could easily pass his competitor if he wanted to.

The horse was evidently so ambitious and anxious to push ahead, that there was a general wish, expressed by shouts and yells, that he should be put to his speed.

But his driver made no effort, except to hold him in, until the race was about half run, at which time the mare had a good lead.

Then Mr. Preston let him go, giving him the word, and touching him lightly with the whip.

Cheers burst from the crowd as Nero reached out his neck, and began fairly to fly over the turf track.

Just then the check rein broke.

The effect upon the Tennessee horse was wonderful, though there was probably no person present but Fred Henning who suspected the cause.

His sudden burst of speed had already carried him abreast of the mare, when he stopped, his forefeet rose in the air, and he refused to take another step.

In spite of the cruel cuts of his enraged driver's whip, he could not be induced to budge.

The mare went over the rest of the course alone, to the great delight of her owner and his friends.

The Nero party were completely crestfallen.

They were broken down, as well as broken up.

Their defeat was overwhelming, disheartening, and inexplicable.

None of them guessed the cause of the horse's strange behavior, though the damage to the check rein was of course discovered. They did not suppose that such a trifling accident would have interfered with the animal.

They paid their losses manfully but mournfully, and returned to the Travelers' Home to ruminant upon the sad event.

The parson, who was largely in pocket by the result of the race, became an oracle in the sight of Farmer Rule and the populace.

At the Travelers' Home he found the confederates gloomily discussing the matter, the discussion consisting mostly of imprecations upon the horse.

"He ain't worth a continental for racing," said the young man. "A horse that you can't depend on is worse than no horse. If I could get five hundred dollars for him right now, I would jump at the offer."

"I will give you that for him," said the parson.

"You will?"

"Yes. It takes a preacher to sell a tricky horse to advantage."

So Nero passed into the possession of Fred Henning, who took him to a livery stable in Helena, and contracted for his board.

CHAPTER XXI.

LIFTING A CLOUD OF GLOOM.

BEFORE Arthur Helmsley went to Memphis, with the intention of doing something to help Colonel Fowle out of his difficulty, but with vague ideas as to what he should do, he tried to comfort Ella; but she was not comforted.

Loving him as she did, and with the strongest belief in his good intentions, she doubted his ability to do what the occasion required, and saw nothing but trouble and sorrow before her.

Her despondency was increased by the sad state of affairs at home.

Ella was hourly compelled to feel—though she knew that the feeling was unjust to herself—that she was the cause of the calamity that was crushing them all. At least, she was the only one who seemed to be able to prevent it.

Yet she would not prevent it. She still resolutely refused to conciliate her father's creditor by delivering herself up to a hated slavery.

In this attitude her mother supported her, and she needed support.

At the same time both of them sympathized deeply with the afflicted colonel, who was utterly woe-begone.

"You don't seem to feel this trouble as I do, Maria," he said, when his wife had been trying to console him. "Neither of you does. I suppose it is because you don't understand it. That mortgage covers six of my best niggers, and if they are sold at auction, as they must be, they won't bring half their value. The loss of those niggers means ruin and destruction to all of us. I can't work the plantation without them, and can't keep the family up, and we will have to give up the old place, and go to Arkansas, or somewhere out of the way of everybody. The sale of those niggers means death to me."

"And the sale of me would mean death to me," said Ella.

He looked at her reproachfully, but made no reply.

As the last of the ten days of grace approached,

the cloud of gloom that hung over the Fowle homestead grew darker and heavier, and the estrangement of the colonel from his family was almost complete.

He kept himself apart from them, ate little, but drank largely, and there were fears that at any moment he might make an attempt upon his life.

Poor Ella was distracted by conflicting emotions, and was seriously doubting whether her duty to her parents did not require her to make a sacrifice of herself.

It was the afternoon of the ninth day, and she had gone out to have a quiet cry all to herself, when she saw an old colored woman trudging up the road toward the house.

She wiped her eyes hastily, and ran in.

Her mother and father were seated in gloomy silence in what was known as the sitting-room.

"Oh, mamma!" she joyfully exclaimed. "Here comes old Aunt Cynthy! Bless her dear old heart! How glad I will be to see her!"

Mrs. Fowle brightened up at once; but nothing could cheer her husband.

"She will be here in time to witness the downfall of the old family," said he. "If she had waited until now, she might have bought Scip cheap enough to suit her."

Ella and her mother gave the old negress a more than kindly welcome, and she was soon comfortably seated and making herself thoroughly at home.

"And what has brought you all the way from Memphis, Aunty, and from that big business that is earning you so much money?" demanded Ida.

"Laws-a-massy, chile, don't you s'pose I wanted to come up an' see de ole place, an' see you all? I'se been away a long time now, an' dough I'se see'd Mars'r Tom, I ain't see'd you an' Miss Mariar. Hope you's all well, an' how's young Mars'r Marsh gittin' on?"

"You find us in good health, but not in good spirits," replied Mrs. Fowle. "Marsh was well when we last heard from him, and we expect him home soon."

"Somedin' de matter, den?"

"Everything's the matter, Cynthy," emphatically replied the colonel. "You have come to see the old place; but it won't be our place much longer. The field hands have got to be sold off, and we will soon be quite broken up."

"I done heerd dat you was in some sawt ob trouble. A gen'leman friend ob yours come to see me in Memphis, an' he tolle me 'bout it."

"Who was he, Aunt Cynthy?" eagerly asked Ella, though fearing the mention of the name of Arthur Helmsley.

"His name is Fred Henning. I reckon Mars'r Tom hain't forgot him. He gi'n me dis letter fur you, Mars'r Tom."

"A letter from Henning? Give it to me, Cynthy."

Colonel Fowle snatched at Fred's letter as, according to the good old simile, a drowning man will grasp at a straw.

But it was not a straw that he grasped; it was a rope.

As he read the letter his face grew red, and his eyes were bright with gladness, and then dull with tears of joy.

It was some minutes before he was able to speak, and then it was in a broken, gasping way.

"The letter says—Cynthy—something about a sum—of money."

"Dat's all right, Mars'r Tom. I'se got de money right yar. Tru's ole Cynthy fur dat. Money's jess as safe wid me as ef 'twas in de bank."

As the old woman spoke, she brought out a bundle from her bosom, untied several strings, pulled out a quantity of pins, removed a number of rags, and disclosed a large roll of bank-bills, which she triumphantly deposited on the table.

"Dar's de money, Mars'r Tom, jess as I got it."

Colonel Fowle hastily and nervously counted the money, while the others looked on in silence, and of course he got it wrong.

He began again, this time putting the different denominations of bills in piles together, and thus finally arrived at the correct total.

"There's five thousand dollars of it!" he exclaimed. "Now I can pay off that infernal mortgage, and John Munford may go to the devil. Bless Fred Henning, and bless Aunt Cynthy!"

He kissed and hugged his wife and daughter, who kissed and hugged Aunt Cynthy, and then all four of them kissed and hugged in a heap.

The colonel ran and brought out his best bottle of whisky with an ample allowance of sugar, and Mrs. Fowle brought out a bottle of her cordial, and Ella brought a big plate of cake, and Aunt Cynthy was petted beyond measure, and in some mysterious manner the news of a great piece of good fortune crept out from the house, and the cloud of gloom that had hung so darkly over the Fowle plantation was broken and dispelled.

"But how did the news of my trouble get to Memphis, Cynthy?" inquired the colonel. "How did Mr. Henning get hold of it?"

"Dat's more'n I know, sah. Didn't ax him."

"Why did he not bring the money, instead of sending it by you?"

"He had to go right away over to Rackensack, sah."

"Was he alone when he came to see you?"

"Um—ah—yes, sah—all alone."

"Well, this money is a Godsend, and you are a messenger of joy to us, Cynthy. I will pay you well for your trouble."

"Don't want nuffin', Mars'r Tom. My spenses is done paid, an' I was pow'ful glad to come up yar an' see you all."

"I hope, Thomas, that you will not put this money in the drawer of your desk," remarked Mrs. Fowle.

"Indeed I will not, Maria. Aunt Cynthy, who had brought it safely from Memphis, shall take care of it to night, and in the morning I will get rid of it soon enough."

The old negress was given one of the best rooms in the house that night, and with her was the responsibility of the treasure that was to save the family.

Ella, who accompanied her to her room, had a suspicion connected with her hesitation in answering the question whether Fred Henning was alone when he came to see her, and she succeeded in talking the truth out of Aunt Cynthy.

The truth was that Arthur Helmsley had come to her cabin with Fred Henning, and that Arthur had accompanied the old woman from Memphis, paying her fare both ways.

She knew nothing more concerning Arthur's connection with the money.

But that was enough for Ella, who went to bed with her brain filled with pleasant thoughts of her lover.

In the morning Colonel Fowle was "bold as a lion," and ready to meet his creditor.

John Munford came at an early hour to demand a final settlement.

There could be no doubt in his mind that the colonel would comply with the condition he prescribed, or would be reduced to such an extremity as should ultimately compel his compliance.

"I have come for my answer," he said, when the two men were seated in the "office."

"For your money, I suppose you mean," replied the colonel.

"For what I am willing to take in place of the money you can't pay me. I will repeat my offer. If your daughter will marry my son within a month, I will give you a clear receipt for all you owe me."

"I have thought over that matter, Mr. Munford, and have come to the conclusion that it will be better for me to pay you the money than to sell you my daughter or allow you to sell my niggers."

"Pay me the money?" exclaimed Munford, in astonishment.

"Yes. Have you brought the mortgage?"

"It is in my pocket. But I don't understand this. A while ago you said that you hadn't a dollar in the world and couldn't raise a dollar, and you begged and implored me to extend the time. How is it that you have the money now?"

"It is enough that I have it," answered the colonel, as he produced a big roll of bills. "At the time you speak of, I had not found you out. You drove a hard bargain with me, and then wanted to push me to the wall, though you had given me to understand that I could have my own time for payment. I know you better now than I knew you then."

"You don't know me yet, Colonel Fowle!" exclaimed Munford, striking the table with his fist. "You haven't found me all out yet. By Jove, sir! you shall know more about me before you are through with me!"

"I know enough about you as it is. There is your money, sir; count it, and then give me a receipt on the mortgage. It is sorted so that you will find it easy to count."

John Munford counted the money, wrote the receipt, and left the house without another word.

"I hope, Thomas," said Mrs. Fowle, "that you will not try to keep that receipted paper in your desk drawer."

"I will not," replied the colonel. "I will give it to you to keep for me."

He signed Fred Henning's note and gave it to Cynthy, without objecting to the time named in the note.

It may be doubted whether he thought about the time, or about the necessity of payment.

This was not because he was dishonest.

He was simply improvident.

But improvidence is next door to dishonesty.

CHAPTER XXII.

FLUSH FRED AS A HORSE-THIEF.

JOHN MUNFORD was angry when he left Colonel Fowle's—very angry—exceedingly angry.

He had his money in his pocket, but had fallen far short of getting what he wanted.

While he was in the house he had bottled up his wrath as well as he could, but when he got out there was an explosion.

He swore horribly, cursing everything in sight

and out of sight, and expended a large part of his anger on his horse.

That unoffending animal had a hard time until his master got home.

Munford sent for Dave Hertsey, a leading member of the "association," and his right bower in that region.

"Dave," said he, "I've been thinking the matter over, and have come to the conclusion that you are right about the people around here. We will have to stir them up, and shake them up, and rattle them, and make them afraid of us. There's plenty of rich pickings about here, and we had better begin to haul them in."

"Jest what I've been tellin' you all along, Cap," replied Dave Hertsey. "We need to scare 'em and git 'em cowed, and then we can elect a sheriff of our own and rule the roost."

"That is what we will do, Dave. I've got the plans in my head, and we will go to work right soon."

John Munford conversed with his confederate for some time, giving him full and careful directions, which appeared to suit Dave amazingly.

Dave Hertsey hurried away to prepare for executing the tasks that had been confided to him, and the "boss" gave himself up to reflection, like a general who is planning a campaign.

He was seeking revenge and profit, and plenty of each, and he wanted to be sure of both.

While he was thus engaged there was an arrival that surprised and delighted him.

It was his son who arrived, accompanied by the Rev. Samuel Sawtell and Charley Schramm.

They did not have the appearance of victors returning from a triumph.

Their brows were not wreathed with laurels, nor their faces with smiles.

Pressley Munford, indeed, seemed to be sad and downcast.

"Glad to see you, my boy," exclaimed his worthy parent. "I didn't expect you back so soon, and didn't look for these gentlemen at all. But I am glad to see you all. How did you get here so soon?"

"We came up on the Sunset," replied Pressley. "We left her at the mouth of the branch."

"That is lucky. I may need the Sunset before long, and it will be handy to have her about. But you have walked from the river, I suppose, and are tired. Sit down and rest, and tell me all about the race. How much did you win? And did you succeed in selling the trotter?"

"We didn't win a cent, but lost a heap," suddenly answered the young man.

"Wha-a-t?" John Munford could not understand this astounding intelligence. It was too much for him. The failure of a sure thing required to be explained to be appreciated.

"Didn't win a cent? Why, Pressley, what do you mean? What on earth can have been the matter?"

Pressley told the sad story of the disastrous race near Helena, and his statement was confirmed by his companions.

John Munford flew into a fearful passion.

His anger when he left Colonel Fowle's was nothing to the white heat of his rage when this intelligence burst upon him.

He cursed until it seemed that the air of the room ought to turn blue.

He ceased only when he had exhausted his vocabulary of profanity.

"That is the cap-sheaf of our bad luck," said he, "and Tom Fowle is the cause of it all. But he will have to settle for it, and pay well, too. I thought he was too much of a fool to get ahead of me; but he swindled me most shamefully in that horse. He represented him to me as sound and perfect in every respect, and I was to have paid him two thousand dollars for the beast, if I hadn't found a way of getting him cheaper. Of course the infernal scoundrel knew that the horse was balky. It is just wonderful how men will lie about horses. But I will make him pay for that swindle."

Pressley Munford, who had been uneasy while his father was abusing Colonel Fowle, ventured to make a suggestion.

"Hadn't you better go a little easy, sir, until that business of the girl is settled?"

"It is settled, curse it! That is bu'sted wide open, too. I went over there this morning, expecting him to come to terms, and he had the money ready for me, and paid me. He was as cool as a chunk of ice about it, too. I couldn't have been worse disappointed if I had pulled a hornet's nest for honey."

"That is a crusher," despondently remarked Pressley. "What is going to be done about it now?"

"We will have to do as the farmer in the spelling book did—try what virtue there is in stones. Oh, you shall have her, my boy, sure as death. Don't worry about that. What frets me is the way that man fooled me, and where did he get the money?"

"I know that his credit is not worth a cent," remarked Pressley.

"I know that, too. Everybody knows it. And I know that when the money was due he didn't have a dollar. But this morning he turned up, bright and shining, with every cent of the five thousand. Where can he have got it?"

"Where can he have got it?" chorused Pressley.

The Rev. Samuel Sawtell would have been glad to inform them both, then and there, that the money came from John Munford's pet antipathy, Fred Henning.

He would have heartily enjoyed the burst of anger that would follow that announcement, and the curses that would be heaped upon the head of the absent Fred.

But his policy did not permit him to make disclosures of any sort just then, and he was obliged to content himself with imagining the effect of what he might say.

"It sticks in my craw," continued John Munford, "that he may have got that money from Arthur Helmsley, who has been trying to shine up to the girl for some time past. I can't think how else he could have got it."

"But he hates all the Helmsleys, and will have nothing at all to do with Arthur," observed the son.

"He may have concluded to be very fond of him, finding himself so hard up. Some men will do 'most anything for money."

"If that is the case, father, we will have to begin to throw stones pretty quick and pretty fast."

"I mean to. You may be sure of that. And Helmsley will come in for a few rocks, too, you may bet. Some folks about here will get a set back before long. So you sold the horse to the parson here. That's right. He couldn't be in better hands. By the way, parson, I've got a job ready for you."

Flush Fred, who had been sitting there in silence, quietly "taking in" all that was said, and thinking his own thoughts the while, roused himself at the mention of his assumed title, and was ready and eager to learn what was waiting for him.

"You will find me on hand, Cap, no matter what it is," he cheerfully replied.

"It is a simple matter. You have bought a horse for five hundred dollars, and may think that you got him cheap; but there is an easier way to get hold of horses, and I want to see what you are worth at that business."

"Do you want me to steal a horse, then?" queried Fred, who did not really hanker after that sort of an experience.

"That's just it. We are going to shake up some of the folks about here, and Arthur Helmsley is one of them who will have to suffer. He has a fine sorrel mare, and we want that mare."

The task would be an easy one, Fred thought, and he was ready to undertake it.

"When shall I do it?" he asked.

"To-night."

"What shall I do with the mare when I get her?"

"Bring her to me, and I will take care of her."

"All right. Direct me to the place, so that I can go and get the lay of the land, and the job will be done to suit you."

Late in the afternoon of the same day Arthur Helmsley was informed by a young person of African descent that there was a "strange gemman out by de hoss lot" who wanted to see him.

"What is his name?" asked Arthur.

"Dunno, sah. He looks like a preachah; but he gimme a quahah."

Coupling this unusual liberality with the fact that the stranger looked like a preacher, Arthur jumped to the conclusion that Fred Henning was there, and that he was in disguise and consequently unwilling to come to the house.

Therefore the young gentleman hastened to the horse lot, where he joyfully welcomed his friend, and proceeded to tell him how peace reigned again in the household of the Fowles.

"I know all about that, my boy," interrupted Fred. "I am afraid that their troubles are not over yet; but we must wait and see how the cat jumps next before we can do anything more."

"You have done wonders already," began Arthur.

"Of course. That is understood. But I didn't come for compliments. I am here on business."

"What sort of business?"

"I understand, Arthur, that you have a fine sorrel mare."

"I have a nice little nag of that description. What of her?"

"I want to steal her."

"To steal her? What do you mean, Fred?"

"Just that I must steal her to-night, and I want you to leave her out where it will be handy for me to get hold of her."

"I don't know what you mean, but it is all right, of course."

"I am not ready to explain my reason, Arthur; but it is all right, as you say. You may never see the mare again. If you don't, I will pay you her value."

"Indeed you will not! I owe you more now than I am likely ever to pay you. You are welcome to the mare, Fred. Come with me, and I will show you where you will find her."

"That will be as easy as lying," said Fred, when the details of the theft had been arranged. "Of course, you will miss the mare in the morning, and then you will raise a howl in the neighborhood about horse-thieves."

CHAPTER XXIII.

COLONEL FOWLE'S EYES OPENED.

FLUSH FRED's entry into the horse-stealing profession was eminently successful.

A little before midnight he rode up to John Munford's house, without a saddle, but with a sufficient bridle.

He was met at the gate by John Munford, his son Pressley, Charley Schramm, and two other men.

The "boss" congratulated the recruit on the prompt performance of his task.

"I see that you will do to bet on, parson," said he. "Is that Arthur Helmsley's mare?"

"It was his a while ago," answered the parson.

"Just so. Do you recognize the mare, Pressley? And you, Dave Hertsey? And you, Joe Ambler?"

They all recognized the mare.

"And if you should be called up in court, would you be able to swear to the man who brought her here?"

They were sure that they would.

"What does this all mean?" demanded the parson.

"It just means that I want you to see the fix you are in. If you should try to go back on us, somebody might bring up this matter of the mare against you. Now that you are in with us, you will have to stay in."

"Of course I mean to stay in," responded the parson. "I hope you don't think that I am the kind of man who would want to drop out. You need not have played any trick on me."

"That's all right, parson. You are only on a level with the rest. Before any man becomes a full member of the association, he is required to do that very thing. It is the initiation."

"It don't worry me a bit, Cap."

"You are the right stuff. Now, if you will step inside, I will tell you of another job I have for you—one that will probably suit you better, and with more money in it."

When they were in the house together, the parson discovered that the "job" that awaited him was more in his line than horse-stealing, and decidedly preferable to that employment.

"Colonel Tom Fowle has a son at college in Kentucky," explained John Munford. "I hear that he is a wild young fellow, as free with his money as if he had a million to back him, and of course he drinks, and plays cards for money."

"He is expected home soon, and will come by boat from Louisville, and I can judge the time pretty closely."

"What I want you to do is to go to Louisville, take passage on the boat with him, and clean him out of his last dollar before he gets to Memphis."

"I understand that you handle the cards right cleverly, and it will be easy enough for you to do that. It will suit me exactly if you get everything he has about him, and send him home flat broke and dead drunk."

The parson accepted the proposition cheerfully, but had a little doubt of his ability.

"There is only one game that I really understand," said he, "and I knew that well before I thought of preaching. There's Charley Schramm, who is well posted in all sorts of games. If I may take him along, I have no doubt that he and I can work the racket, as the world's people say."

"Take Charley, then, though I had thought of making him useful about here. I suppose you will need some money."

The parson was sure that he would. So much of his money had gone into John Munford's pocket that he thought it was high time to begin to get some of it out, and he took all he could get.

Early the next morning Pressley Mumford drove him and Charley Schramm to the nearest railway town, and left them there.

But the parson did not take the first train to the north.

Instead of that he took a room, from which he shortly emerged as Fred Henning, and it is probable that he felt greatly relieved at being able to resume his true character.

Then he hired a buggy, and drove direct to Colonel Fowle's.

He had been pleasantly received there before on two occasions, but had never been as cordially welcomed as he was at this time.

It is true that Ella was somewhat restrained, and that Mrs. Fowle was meek as if from a sense of obligation; but their looks spoke more forcibly than their words, telling him that he was greeted both as a friend and as a benefactor.

But the colonel was enthusiastic.

Relieved for a time from the pressure of debt and the fear of a forced sale of his property, he was his genial, hospitable self again.

"You are more than welcome, my boy!" he exclaimed. "Welcome over and over again. You find us easy and happy and jolly here today, and we owe it all to you, every bit of it."

"Please cut that off short, colonel," replied Fred. "Life is too short to bother about the past."

"Not too short for us, my dear fellow. You shall see that we are grateful for your unexpected kindness and generous assistance—every one of us. But I want to know—"

"And I have not time to tell you, if you will pardon me for cutting in. I have come for a little business talk with you, and am in a hurry. If the ladies will excuse us, we will have it out with no delay."

"All right, my boy. Step into my office."

The colonel naturally wondered what Fred's business could be, and why he was in such a hurry.

He was not at all backward in inquiring.

"What is the business you speak of, friend Henning? The note was all right. I signed it just as you sent it, and gave it to Aunt Cynthia."

"It is not that," answered Fred.

What could it be, then? Was it possible that Henning, having advanced the money for Munford, expected to take that creditor's place, and claim the hand of Ella?

That would be too much. He was a good fellow as a friend and as a money-lender; but as a husband for Ella he was not to be thought of.

But it was a far different matter of business that burdened the mind of Fred Henning.

"You have told me, Colonel Fowle," said he, "that you think you must have some bitter enemy about here. Have you found out who that enemy is?"

"No. I have no sort of a clew."

"I know who it is."

"You do? Is it Arthur Helmsley?"

"No person who bears the name of Helmsley or is related to any of the Helmsleys. But before you learn of the discoveries I have made, you must promise to keep everything I tell you a strict secret, even from your family."

The colonel solemnly promised.

"Your enemy," said Fred, "is John Munford."

"John Munford? I have had my doubts about him lately."

"I should think you might have. But what I am going to tell you will astonish you. He is at the head of an extensive thieving band, or association, as he calls it, which I have joined for the purpose of getting hold of his secrets, and I have got hold of them."

The colonel was a little incredulous at this point, as John Munford had described Fred Henning to him as a most detestable character.

"That is queer," said he. "Why, Munford hates you worse than poison."

"I know that, and he will have better cause to hate me before I am through with him. But I am not Fred Henning when I am in his crowd."

"Ah! Disguised?"

"Of course. John Munford pretended to be your friend, so that he might cripple you, and get you in his power, and force a marriage between your daughter and his son. His first game was to get money from you on a fraudulent mortgage."

"Fraudulent?" shrieked the colonel.

"Entirely so. You loaned the money to a man named Huffner. Do you know what has become of him?"

"The last letter I had from Helena told me that he had died in Missouri."

"The fact is that there is no such man as Huffner. Your letters from Helena were written by Lewis Mosely, who is a chief of Munford's gang at Helena. I know him well. He personated Huffner here, and sent you the letters from Helena. I don't know that John Munford got the money, or that he stole the fraudulent mortgage from your desk; but I have no doubt that he did."

"Creation!" exclaimed the colonel, who was utterly bewildered.

"Then you lost a valuable horse. John Munford was to buy him for two thousand dollars; but found it cheaper to steal him."

"What? Munford got my horse? He stole Nero?"

"Stole him and shipped him to Helena, where I bought him from Pressley Munford for five hundred dollars. There is a good joke about that matter, which I haven't got time to tell you now. The horse is safe, and you can get him when the time comes. I know nothing about the burning of your cotton-gin, but can guess that John Munford knows."

"The infernal scoundrel!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Then he loaned you money when you were in trouble, and put the screws to you, to compel you to give your daughter to his son."

The colonel jumped up, and flew into a passion.

"That man is a wild beast!" he exclaimed. "He is a terror! He has laid himself liable to the law. I will send him to the State prison. I will shoot him on sight."

"You will do nothing of the kind, my dear sir, unless you are willing to break the promise you have given me. You must remember that I have no legal proof of what I have told you—that is, to connect John Munford with it. His son might be accused of having stolen goods in his possession; but that was in Arkansas. You must simply keep quiet, and wait until I get back."

"Where are you going, friend Henning?"

"I am going to skin your son alive."

"What in the name of goodness do you mean by that?"

"By the orders of John Munford I am going direct to Louisville, to come down the river with your son, to play cards with him, to beat him out of every dollar he has, and to send him home as near a wreck as possible. Munford has supplied me with money for that purpose, and don't you think I can accomplish it?"

"I should say that you can, if you want to. But I—I am very glad that Marsh will be in your hands."

"Will you give me a very short letter of introduction to him?"

"Gladly."

"Now, colonel," said Fred, when he had got the note, "you have only to keep quiet for the present, let John Munford alone, guard against thefts and swindles, and take good care of your daughter. Yes, there is one other point. If you want to get even with that scoundrel, you will have to make friends with the Helmsleys."

"I will never do that, Henning."

"I have no time to argue the point, colonel; but you will have to come to that."

Flush Fred left the ladies disconsolate because he resisted their entreaties to stay to dinner, and drove to the Helmsley place.

There he found Mrs. Helmsley covered with gloom, and her daughter in deep distress, because of the loss of the sorrel mare.

"She was my pet," said Kate. "She was my own riding-horse. I had named her Kate, and I was so fond of her, and she was so fond of me!"

"If the thief had known that," said Fred, "he surely could never have had the heart to steal the mare."

"Thieves have no hearts, Mr. Henning."

"I am not so sure of that. I have known one in my time who was really bothered in that way."

But Fred had no time for sympathy or any other emotion just then.

He had some advice and caution for Arthur, which he duly delivered, and hastened back to the railway town, where he and Charley Schramm took the first train northward.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRED FINDS ANOTHER FOWLE.

MARSHALL FOWLE, the colonel's son, was a young man of twenty, who was in appearance at least two years older.

He was tall, athletic, handsome, and as fine a specimen of young manhood to look at as either Tennessee or Kentucky could produce, and that is not a little thing to say.

He had been attending a so-called college in Kentucky, which was in reality a military institute with an educational attachment—perhaps the best sort of a college he could have been sent to.

Among his comrades he was familiarly known as Marsh, and the name of Marsh Fowle suggested various nicknames, which were readily applied—such as Heron, Crane, Loon, and the like.

But after the young fellow had had a few fights about that sort of thing, he got used to it, and rather liked it.

The so-called college was an expensive place.

The scholars were nearly all the sons of rich men, who "slung on style" extensively, and spent their money lavishly.

Marsh Fowle was bound to hold up his head with the best of them.

He came of an extravagant stock, and his training had never been in the direction of economy.

He was distinguished, among other things, for the elegance of his attire, and the general freedom with which he dispensed his ducats.

Consequently it is not surprising that he got the reputation at home, as well as elsewhere, of being a most prodigious spendthrift.

After he was informed by letters from home—vaguely and severely by his father, and more definitely and affectionately by his mother and sister—of the money troubles there, he was glad that the term was about to end, and that he would soon be clear of his expensive surroundings.

This feeling, however, did not prevent him from stopping in high style at the best hotel in Louisville, and waiting for the finest boat that went southward from that port.

Nothing less than the Shotwell would suit the young aristocrat.

He paid his passage like a prince, and was assigned to one of the best state-rooms on the boat.

His tall and elegant figure caused general remark as he walked down the long cabin, and he

had been but a little while on board when he was almost intimate with the ladies in the after part of the boat.

In the forward part, and especially in the Social Hall, he was inclined to be exclusive.

He took a few fastidious drinks at the bar, but was not disposed to associate with any of the passengers in that region except the elderly and solid ones, upon whom his style made a favorable impression.

When night came on, and cards were brought out, he kept aloof from the games, and easily resisted the advances that were made to induce him to engage in them.

At last he accepted the invitation of three apparently solid citizens to sit down quietly at a table with them, to pass the time, and poker was proposed, with limited stakes, merely to make the game interesting.

The three citizens, according to their own accounts, were each solid in his way.

One was a Mississippi planter, another was an Arkansas merchant, and the third was going to New Orleans to collect the money for a drove of mules from his farm in Kentucky.

None of them seemed to be a skillful player, and the game was not interesting.

The young man had won several small pots, when the Mississippi planter proposed that the limit of betting should be raised, and the two other solid citizens assented to the proposition at once.

Marshall Fowle rose from his chair.

"I must ask you to excuse me, gentlemen," said he. "I will leave you to enjoy your game."

"What do you mean?" demanded the planter.

"I mean that I am not accustomed to playing cards for money, and am not willing to go beyond my depth."

"But you have been winning straight along, and now you want to quit when you are ahead," sneered the Mississippian. "Is that your style?"

"I don't know that I have any special style about that sort of thing. If the small amount of money that I have won is in the way of my quitting, I will lay it on the table, and you can divide it to suit yourselves."

As the young man put his hand into his pocket to get the money, the gentleman from Arkansas flared up.

"Do you mean to insult us?" he hotly demanded.

"I can't see that I have insulted you," replied Fowle, "unless you want to be insulted. I sat down to play a game for amusement, and am not going to be drawn into heavy betting. That is all."

"That sort of thing won't do," said the planter. "We can't allow you to quit in that way."

"Can't you? Very well. I have quit the game. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"You shall see what we will do, young chap, and that mighty soon."

"You will do nothing at all," quietly remarked a fifth man, who had approached the table during the altercation.

The fifth man was Flush Fred, who had kept his eyes on young Fowle since he left Louisville, and had formed ideas of his own concerning him, quite different from those which he had received from his father and John Munford.

Marshall Fowle looked around, and saw a well-dressed young man, of quiet and gentlemanly appearance.

The three solid citizens looked up, and must have recognized Flush Fred, as their demeanor changed instantly.

"The young gentleman has a right to quit if he wants to," said Fred. "You surely don't expect to hold him to a game against his will."

"That's all right," answered the man who claimed to be a Mississippi planter. "We don't want to force anything on him; but when he sat down we expected him to stay with us a while."

Marshall Fowle turned away, and Fred Henning followed him.

"That's a mean trick of Flush Fred's," whispered one of the solid citizens. "Of course he wants to carve the goose himself."

"He will find it a tough one, I reckon," replied the gentleman from Arkansas.

"Are you not Marshall Fowle?" inquired Fred.

"That is my name," answered the young man.

"Son of Colonel Tom Fowle, of Tennessee?"

"Yes."

"I am acquainted with your father, and have a letter of introduction to you."

"I am glad to meet you, sir. I had got into a sort of a mess yonder, as you saw, and thought I had better back out. I wish you would tell me why those men cooled down so quickly when you spoke to them."

"Because I know them, and they know me. Before I show you the letter I spoke of, Mr. Fowle, I may as well introduce myself. I am the man who killed your father."

"The man who killed my father?" exclaimed Marshall.

Then his face changed, and he laughed heartily.

"Oh, yes!" he said. "I know all about that. My sister wrote me the full particulars, and I nearly split my sides over the story. So you are Fred Henning. I am ever so glad to see you. All's well that ends well, you know."

"Yes, and I am glad that the killing business ended better than it threatened to. Here is the letter; but it really amounts to nothing, as it doesn't explain my purpose in being here. I am under orders to follow you from Louisville, and to skin you alive."

The young man looked at his companion as if he doubted his sanity.

"Come, come, Mr. Henning. You can talk sense if you want to. What do you mean by that?"

"I can talk sense to *you*, Marshall Fowle, and I am as glad of that as if I had fallen into a fortune. I have lots and lots to tell you, and it is of the greatest importance to you and to your family that you should understand matters clearly."

"That suits me exactly. Let us get some cigars, and go out on the guards, where we can be quiet."

Flush Fred had measured young Fowle closely.

He found him to differ considerably from the impression his father had conveyed, and from the idea that John Munford had of him.

A solid, sensible young fellow, in fact, who could be trusted to think and act well and coolly.

Just the sort of young man who was needed at the present crisis in his family's affairs.

Consequently Fred told him a long story.

It was bound to be a long story, as he gave every particular of Colonel Fowle's afflictions as far as he knew them, and of his own connection with the family and John Munford.

The young gentleman interrupted the narrative frequently to express his opinion concerning matters, and especially to speak in praise of Fred's sagacity and disinterestedness.

"You are wonderfully kind to take such an interest in us, Mr. Henning," he said. "I don't know how we are ever going to pay you for all you have done for us, to say nothing of what you expect to do. But for my part I will try to let you know that we are not ungrateful."

"Suppose we drop that, my young friend, and talk business. What do you think of the advice I have given you?"

"I believe it to be entirely correct. I have been brought up to regard that feud with the Helmsleys as part of the family inheritance; but I am now convinced that it is worse than foolish. I will act on your advice; but you know how hard-headed the old gentleman is. I will have to humor him."

"You will bring him around. Since I have found out what you are, I believe that things will be straightened up. Now I must go back into the cabin. I have a partner here, and we must try to make our expenses on this trip. As you are not to be fleeced, I will have to look for other victims."

CHAPTER XXV.

ANOTHER PLOT FOR THE PARSON.

JOHN MUNFORD was holding a confab with his son and Dave Hertsey, when the Rev. Samuel Sawtell and Charley Schramm returned from their trip up and down the river.

"So you have got back," said he. "What luck did you have?"

"As good as could be expected," replied the parson.

"Did you clean the young cuss out?"

"Of all he had. He didn't have much—not enough to pay expenses; but we got that. I had to lend him five dollars to take him home, and I suppose he is laid up now with a swelled head."

"That was the best you could do, I suppose. Tom Fowle will be welcome to all the comfort he can get out of that scamp. We have been busy while you were away."

"What have you been doing?"

"Making it lively for some of the people about here, including Tom Fowle and Arthur Helmsley. I reckon you will hear enough of it if you go about any. By the way, parson, I shall need you to-night. I expect to have a job for you that is in your line."

The parson did hear, and that right soon, of the manner in which John Munford, with the aid of the "association," had been making it lively for his neighbors.

He went to visit Arthur Helmsley, sending a young African to the house for him, and meeting him at the horse-lot as formerly.

"Where have you been all this time?" inquired Arthur.

"I have been hunting a fool and finding a wise man. But I will tell you all about that in time. Have you heard anything of your sister's horse that was stolen?"

"Nothing."

"I have been all broken up about that. If I had known that it was her horse I would never have undertaken the job. But it was part of the contract, and can't be helped now."

"That is not a circumstance, Fred, to what has been going on while you were away."

"I have had a hint of that from another party. Tell me all about it."

Arthur Helmsley had a long story to tell.

It was a story of horse stealing, of burglaries, of thefts of various descriptions, all about the neighborhood.

He and Colonel Fowle had been the worst sufferers, and on the Helmsley plantation the scoundrels had not been content with robbery, but had cruelly and wantonly mutilated horses and cattle.

The sheriff and his deputies had been active, together with the county constables, but had as yet found no clew to the perpetrators of the outrages.

All the sufferers had banded together to put a stop to the crimes and punish the criminals, with the exceptions of Colonel Fowle and John Munford.

John Munford claimed to be a loser by the depredations, but preferred to act independently.

Colonel Fowle, as might be expected, would have nothing to do with any plan or organization with which the Helmsleys were connected, and most of the Helmsleys were equally unwilling to associate with him.

"Just so," said Fred Henning. "The infernal feuds and jealousies of such neighborhoods as this are enough to upset everything. That sort of thing must be stopped if you want to succeed."

"I would be glad enough to stop it all," answered Arthur; "but that seems to be impossible."

"Not as impossible as you may suppose. There is one important person who will join you in an effort to quiet the feud."

"Do you mean Ella?"

"No; her brother. Come into the stable, where we will be out of sight, and I will tell you all about it."

Fred gave his friend the full particulars of his meeting with Marshall Fowle on the Shotwell, and of his experience with that young gentleman.

Arthur Helmsley was more than rejoiced at what he heard.

"That is a very pleasant surprise," said he. "It gives a fair promise of peace and happiness, and we owe it all to you. If you had done nothing else for me, Fred, that would entitle you to my everlasting gratitude."

"It won't bring back your sister's horse, though, and that ought to entitle me to an everlasting kicking. Have a little patience, Arthur, and I hope we can get all these tangles straightened up. I must go now and see what the next move of the enemy will be."

The next move was intended to show the extent of John Munford's audacity, and to make an end of his operations in that region.

He explained it to the parson when that individual returned from roaming about the neighborhood, full of the stories he had heard of the recent mysterious depredations.

"Yes," said Munford with a chuckle; "we have stirred them up right lively, and have got hold of about as much property as we care to carry away."

"What do you do with it all?"

"We have a good lot stored on the Sunset down at the river, and more in the cellar here, which we will put aboard of her one of these nights. Then she will steam away and be safe, and then we will realize on the stuff and divide the profits. There will be a good bit coming to you, parson."

"That will suit me," replied the parson. "Money is what I want. Give me plenty of money, and I can run a church to suit myself."

The "boss" made a remark concerning the churches that would have shocked a preacher in good standing.

"If you want to run a church," said he, "you can start one for me to-night, and I will pay you well for it. I am going to make Tom Fowle's daughter my son's wife, and you shall attend to the marriage business."

"How are you going to bring her around?" inquired the parson.

"Just by main strength and awkwardness. All the nice work has been already put in by Press. The fact is, parson, that Arthur Helmsley is the man she wants, and his head is set on her."

"That makes it rather bad for you, I should say."

"Not a bit of it. Some heads can be set on things, as well as others. Press has his head set on the girl, and mine is set on his having everything he wants. He has been looking after the affair for himself, and has got the business down fine."

"There is a hollow tree in the woods back of Tom Fowle's house, which the girl and young Helmsley use as a post-office. One drops a letter there, and the other comes along and gets it."

"Of course, Press is smart enough to open the letters, read them, and seal them up."

"They also meet at the same place, and make appointments by letter, and this morning Press

found a letter there from him, asking her to meet him this evening after dark.

"We know the route she takes, and we will be on hand—Press and I and you."

"We will pick her up on the way, and will bring her here, and you shall marry her to Press."

"Then we will put her on board the Sunset and slide out."

"How does that strike you, parson?"

"It seems to be correct; but you ought to know best about that. I will be ready to do my part of the job. At what time will you want me to be on hand?"

"You will take supper here, of course, and soon after supper we will start."

CHAPTER XXVI.

ABDUCTION AND MARRIAGE.

THE parson did not need to reflect upon the plot arranged by John Munford.

He had made up his mind as soon as it was proposed to him, and was ready to do his share.

His share included a little work that was not contemplated by the "boss," and he was obliged to move about pretty lively in order to get through with it.

As he had the use of John Munford's horses, and there was nobody to question his doings, he secured a good mount, and rode rapidly to Arthur Helmsley's place.

When he had finished his business there, he hunted up Charley Schramm, to whom he intrusted a letter for Ella Fowle.

Charley was instructed to deliver it to the young lady herself, and to bring back an answer, written or verbal.

At supper-time the parson "bobbed up serenely" at Munford's, and was the third at the table with the two other conspirators.

The son was nervous and excited; but the father was calm and determined.

Little was said by either of them concerning the contemplated outrage, and the parson was not encouraged to speak of it.

They evidently believed that their plans were well laid and that nothing was needed but efficient action.

But the parson was a little worried.

He had not yet seen Charley Schramm since he sent him to Colonel Fowle's, and it was possible that his own plans might miscarry.

As the party made their preparations for departure, his anxiety made him nervous.

A two-seated spring-wagon was ready for them at dark, and when they went out to it Charley had not yet put in an appearance.

But he stepped forward briskly when they were about to take their seats, and nodded in answer to the parson's inquiring glances.

"What's up now?" he asked. "Going on a private spree?"

"We are going to take a little ride," answered the "boss." "Stay here and look after the house, Charley. Dave Hertsey will be along shortly."

"All right," replied the hunchback, with a wink that put the parson at ease.

Press Munford drove, and his father and the parson occupied the back seat.

Not far from Colonel Fowle's, a narrow lane set off from the main road toward the south.

On the eastern side of the lane was a piece of woods, and the western side was heavily bordered along the fence by bushes and vines, and the house was just in sight.

The team was driven a short distance into the lane, and was turned around under the cover of the trees.

It was explained to the parson that Ella Fowle always crossed the field that lay between the lane and the house, climbed the rail-fence, and passed into the woods to her post-office tree.

At the point where she got over the fence she would be seized.

"You stay here and take care of the team, parson, and we will do the heavy work," said the "boss."

John Munford and his son walked down the lane, and concealed themselves near the fence under the bushes.

The parson, after hitching the horses, placed himself in a position to look across the field and down the lane.

He soon had cause to admire the accuracy with which his partners had calculated their opportunity.

After a little while he caught sight of a young lady—though he saw her dimly in the darkness—who was crossing the cotton-field, near the fence that separated it from the cornfield.

There could be no mistaking that figure, taller than most women, but lithe and graceful, and the clinging and perfectly fitting dress Ella Fowle always wore.

On she came evidently suspecting no harm, picking her way swiftly and surely in the darkness, as if she was accustomed to that path.

As she approached the fence the parson could see that she was heavily veiled, and that her veil was tied around her neck.

This was doubtless to prevent discovery of her person and her purposes.

She passed out of the parson's view as she reached the lane fence; but he heard something.

What he heard was a scream.

It was a slight scream, and quickly choked off, as if she had been gagged.

She had not really been gagged, but the parson saw what had happened when John Munford and his son hurried her up the lane to where he was posted.

He had hastened to unhitch the horses, and was then standing at their heads awaiting the other conspirators.

He then saw that they had tied a cloth over her face, outside of her veil, and had also tied her hands.

The parson watched them closely as they brought her to the wagon.

It was clear to him that she had not fainted, and yet she was limp in their hands, as if she was paralyzed by fright.

She was lifted into the back seat, and John Munford got in there with her.

The other two climbed into the front seat, Pressley taking the reins.

The young man was yet more excited and nervous than he had been at the supper table; but his father was as cool and calm and determined as ever.

They drove quietly out of the lane, and rapidly up the road, and scarcely a word was spoken while they made the distance of more than three miles.

Often Pressley Munford looked around, but only once he spoke.

"Father, is she—"

"No!" gruffly answered John Munford. "Don't make a fool of yourself. She is all right, if you will only hold your tongue."

When the wagon reached John Munford's house the darkness was intense.

The sound of the wheels and of the horses' hoofs brought out Dave Hertsey and Charley Schramm, who were the only people visible.

John Munford, calling Dave Hertsey to his assistance, lifted down the almost inanimate form of the girl, and she was carried into the house, Pressley at her side, and the parson and Charley Schramm following.

They led her into the sitting room, which was also the dining-room of the farm-house, and which was lighted none too brilliantly by a coal-oil lamp.

She sunk into a chair without uttering a word.

Indeed, she could not have spoken if she had tried, as the bandage was still over her mouth, and her hands were tied so that she could not remove it.

"Stand here, Pressley," ordered John Munford. "We must get through with this in a hurry."

When he had untied her hands and taken the cloth from her face, her first movement was to clutch at her veil and hold it down.

Then he assisted her to rise, and placed her at the side of Pressley, still holding her arm.

She did not speak, but her slight form shivered as he touched her, and she seemed to be dazed.

"Go ahead, parson," ordered John Munford. "I suppose you know the service, and don't need any book."

Pressley Munford took the young lady's gloved hand in his, and the parson stepped forward and began his work as if he were an old hand at the business.

"Do you, Pressley, take this young woman to be your lawful wedded wife, to love, cherish and protect her while you both shall live?"

"I do," answered the young man, a little nervously.

"Do you—what is the young lady's name, Mr. Munford?"

"Ella Fowle."

"Do you, Ella, take this young man to be your lawful wedded husband, to love, honor and obey him while you both shall live?"

She did not answer, except by a hysterical sob, and again her slight form shivered.

"Silence gives consent," said the cheerful parson. "Then, by virtue of the authority vested in me, I pronounce you man and wife. Pressley Munford, salute your bride!"

The shrinking girl attempted no resistance when the young man raised her veil and disclosed the countenance of a negress!

A young and comely negress, and a mulatto at that, but none the less a negress.

Fred Henning recognized her at once, and so did John Munford and his son, as Celia, Ella Fowle's maid.

She seemed to be terribly frightened, and well she might be, as she needed all her fortitude when she found herself in that den of wolves.

Pressley Munford started back, astonished, confused, and for the moment incapable of anything but silent amazement.

John Munford looked quickly and inquiringly at every person in the room, his glance resting longest on the parson, whose countenance wore a queer expression.

Then his wrath flamed up in his face, and burst out at his mouth in a storm of oaths.

He grabbed at the mulatto girl, who evaded his grasp and ran from him.

She would have run out at the door if Dave Hertsey had not stood there to stop her.

"There seems to have been a mistake made," coolly remarked the parson. "I ought to have collected my fee in advance."

"This is nothing to joke about," exclaimed John Munford, with a fearful oath. "I want to know who is responsible for this swindle, and I mean to find out, if I have to whip the life out of that nigger."

The "nigger" had dropped upon a chair, nearly paralyzed by fear, as she probably realized for the first time the danger of her position.

"That sort of thing won't do, Cap," said the Rev. Samuel Sawtell, speaking calmly but in a determined tone.

"How do you know it won't do?" angrily demanded John Munford. "I say that it will do, and it won't be healthy for any man to dispute me."

"I say that it won't do at all, and if you will cool down a bit you will see that it won't do. Whoever has put up the job, it is likely that this girl is innocent, and she ought not to be made to suffer for another person's fault. Suppose you give her a chance to tell her story."

"Let's hear what she has to say," suggested Pressley. "Perhaps we can get to the bottom of the thing that way."

Thus encouraged, Celia found her tongue, and proceeded to tell her story, though it was rendered rather misty by her tears and sobs.

"Befo' de Lawd, sah," she said, "I hain't put up nuffin', an' hain't tried to do no harm to nobody. It was Miss Ella w'ot dressed me up in her clo'es, an' sent me 'cross de field to de woods; an' I didn't do nuffin' but jess w'ot young missus tolle me to do, an' dat's de Gospil troof. I didn't know nuffin' 'bout you folks, an' didn't hab nuffin' to do wid you, an' nebber 'specte to meet you out dar, nohow."

"Why did she send you there?" demanded Pressley.

"Jess fur to play a joke on Arthur He'msley, sah—dat's w'ot she tolle me, an' I war gwine to find him when you cotched me."

"Why did you not speak and let us know who you were?"

"Befo' de Lawd, sah, you didn't gib me no chainte. You tied up my mouf, an' kerried me away, an' when I got heah I was so bad scar'd I couldn't say a word."

"I judge that she is speaking the truth" remarked the parson.

"I suppose she is," grumbled John Munford, whose anger had not abated, though its visible fire had cooled down.

"I suppose she is; but she has brought me the worst piece of luck that I have had for this long time. I suppose we ought to have made sure that we had caught the right bird; but who would ever have suspected such a trick as that?"

"It is infernally unfortunate that Ella Fowle happened to take that notion into her head just then," observed Pressley.

"What shall we do with the girl?" asked the parson. "We can't let her go back home, as she would give the business away."

"Befo' de Lawd, sah, I won't nebber say a word to nobody," declared Celia.

"We can't trust you for that. I reckon, Cap, that you will have to shut her up and let your niggers look after her, until—"

"Yes," assented John Munford—"until we slide off on the Sunset."

"But the Fowles will miss her and look for her."

"Let them look. It won't be the first thing they have looked for lately without finding it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE OLD FIELD FEUD.

HARRY HOTSPUR HELMSLEY was rightly named, as he was by nature headstrong and daring to recklessness, high-tempered, fierce, and impatient of any opinion but his own.

He was tall and handsome, a capital horseman, an excellent shot, expert in all athletic exercises, and a gamester who had good reason to boast of his skill.

In fact, he was the young prince of the country, and his position was unquestioned.

Being Arthur Helmsley's cousin, and a few years his senior, as well as heir to a bigger property, he assumed the right to lord it over Arthur, and to give him advice which he intended should be respected as commands.

Being generally looked up to as the head of the Helmsley family, he regarded himself as an inheritor of the feud with the Fowles, although that difficulty in truth affected only Arthur's estate.

Feeling such a deep interest in that feud, he was bitterly opposed to any sort of a compromise, even if the other side had shown any disposition to compromise, which the other side had always totally failed to show.

He knew that Arthur would be more than willing to shuffle off the difficulty and get rid of it, and on that account he watched his cousin closely, for the purpose of preventing any such weakness.

The feud, as was generally the case with such foolish family quarrels, had grown to big pro-

portions from a very small beginning, and its origin had been simply contemptible.

It was all about a petty and worthless strip or gore of land between the Fowle and Helmsley plantations.

This strip was claimed by both families, the original deeds of the land having described the boundary-line so indefinitely that it was really difficult to determine on which side of the strip it ought to run.

They had gone to law about it, and the legal fight developed personal conflicts, until Dick Fowle killed Arthur Helmsley's grandfather just after they had both come out of church.

Thereafter the feud became more intense and bitter, and bloodshed was looked for whenever any of the contending parties came in sight of each other.

The legal aspect of the case in the mean time had gone from bad to worse.

The wretched strip of land had dragged the two families into the court of chancery, which still flourished in Tennessee, and there they were hopelessly tied up and tangled.

As for the value of the strip, that had been many and many times expended in feeing lawyers, and in the endless costs of the litigation.

In fact, it was merely an old field which had been long since worn out, producing nothing but unsightly broom sedge, and refusing to grow even briars and brambles.

It was commonly said of it that the soil would not sprout black-eyed pears.

At last something in the shape of a decision was reached, though it was merely temporary and unsatisfactory.

It was ordered that a fence long since erected by the Helmsleys, and which had rotted down until it was nearly invisible, should be removed—pending further consideration and adjudication.

Arthur would gladly have effaced the last vestige of the old fence, but failed to do so, owing to the opposition of his cousins.

The sheriff of the county was then directed to do the work, and a day was set for the execution of the order of the court.

Arthur Helmsley and his sister were not at all surprised, on the morning of that day, to see their cousin Harry Hotspur ride up to the house, accompanied by his young brothers, Bradley and Prentiss Helmsley.

They carried rifles, as well as weapons that were concealed, and it was easy enough to guess the object of their visit.

"More trouble about nothing, Kate," said Arthur, with a sigh. "Yes, about worse than nothing."

"I hope, Arthur, that you will not refuse to stand up for your own family," remarked his mother.

"Of course, mother, I will stand up for the family," answered Arthur, who did not wish to argue the question with her.

The three cousins were of course hospitably and heartily welcomed, the tie of kinship being very strong in that country.

Their horses were stabled and fed, and the best the house afforded in the way of eatable and drinkable was set before them.

Harry Hotspur soon made known his mission in his imperious and off-hand way.

"Well, Arthur," said he, "we have come to see Sheriff Bryson pull down the fence."

"It will scarcely need any pulling," replied Arthur. "I think it will puzzle him to find anything to pull down."

"But of course you don't mean to allow him to touch it."

"Why not? It is the order of the court."

"Who cares for the order of the court? Since when have we begun to obey orders? I have been to see Em. Etheridge, and he tells me that the order amounts to nothing, as it don't touch the merits of the controversy. If it don't touch the merits of the controversy, Jack Bryson had better keep away from that field."

Arthur Helmsley said nothing; but his look showed that he was bored and worried.

"You must go down there with us, Arthur," continued his fiery cousin. "Of course the Fowles will be on hand."

"I suppose they will. Bryson will need somebody to show him where to find the fence—if there is anything left of it. Of course I will go with you, Harry, though I am tired of the whole business. But there is plenty of time."

"Tired of the whole business, are you? We know what that means, Arthur. It has got to be common talk that you are in love with Tom Fowle's daughter. That is all the respect you have for your family and your rights. It is lucky that I am on hand and able to look after things."

Arthur smiled, and left the talking to his mother and his cousins.

They were still at it when a smart-looking colored man rode up to the house, leading a handsome sorrel horse.

Kate Helmsley, who was standing at the window, clapped her hands, and her joyful cry brought her brother to her side.

"Look, Arthur," she exclaimed. "Here is my Kate come back!"

It was not the sorrel mare that had been stolen, but was so very like her that the young lady wondered what it meant.

What it meant was shown by a letter which the colored man handed to Arthur Helmsley, and which he was compelled to read for the benefit of all.

It was in these words:

"My DEAR MR. HELMSLEY:—

"I was very sorry to hear of the loss of your sister's riding horse, which I had admired so much. I have happened to come across a mare which is near enough like her to be called a match, and I send her to you, begging you to persuade your sister to accept her in the place of the pet which some scoundrel stole from your stable. Hoping that I am not too fresh, and deeply remembering how much I owe you, I remain,

"Yours very truly,

"FRED HENNING."

"That is all correct," said Arthur, as he handed the messenger a liberal *douceur*.

"Does Kate accept such a present from a comparative stranger?" asked his mother.

"I hope she does. If she does not, I must take it in her place. He is not a comparative stranger to me, but my particular friend, and I am anxious that Kate should oblige him by accepting the mare."

"He writes a good letter," said Harry Hotspur, who had not been backward in picking it up and reading it. "I am sure that I have heard of him. Isn't he a sporting man."

"That is just what he is," replied Arthur. "He plays cards for a living, and on the river he is known as Flush Fred."

"That man, hey! Of course I have heard of him. He has a big reputation as a gamester. I would give considerable for a chance to try him at seven-up."

"Do you suppose any man in the world could beat you at that, Harry?"

"I doubt it. I would like to see the man who could."

Before he set out with his cousins for the old field, Arthur Helmsley wrote a note, and sent it away by a negro boy.

He was careful to keep that note from the sight of Harry Hotspur, as it was directed to Marshall Fowle.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE EVE OF THE FACTION FIGHT.

SHERIFF JACK BRYSON was of course thoroughly acquainted with the feud between the Fowles and the Helmsleys.

He was also thoroughly disgusted with it, though it had brought much money to his office in the way of fees.

Naturally he was displeased at being compelled to execute the order for the removal of an old fence, which, if it still existed, was of no earthly consequence to anybody.

Besides, he was as busy as he could be in trying to find a clew to the thieves who had lately committed so many depredations in the neighborhood.

He hated to be bothered with what he justly styled "infernal foolishness," and to be officially forced into a senseless faction fight between his neighbors.

He hoped—though he feared that it was a hopeless hope—that the difficulty might be in some way smoothed over, so that he would be relieved of his unpleasant duty.

Of course he visited Colonel Fowle's plantation in the first place, as the order of the court was in the interest of the Fowles, and as they might be expected, if anybody would, to be able to find the fence that was to be removed.

Colonel Fowle was rejoiced to see him there on that errand, receiving him with the most enthusiastic welcome and the most lavish hospitality.

In the view of the colonel the order for the removal of the fence was an important step in the legal controversy, and a great triumph for the Fowle side.

In the view of his son Marshall it only complicated a question which was already too complicated, and came at an unfortunate juncture, just at the time when there was a reasonable chance of making a sensible settlement of the stupid old trouble.

Fred Henning, who had opportunely arrived that morning, was strongly inclined to side with Marshall, but was in no hurry to thrust his opinion upon the family council.

Mrs. Fowle and Ella sympathized with Marshall, though they had little to say.

The sheriff did not fail to note these signs of the state of feeling, and was encouraged by them to a certain extent, though he well knew that the colonel's obstinacy was a match for all the rest.

The colonel was decidedly of the same opinion, and he also knew that nothing could be done or neglected in the matter without his consent.

"I suppose I must go ahead with this job," remarked Jack Bryson, "though I must say that I have mighty little taste for it. Don't you think, colonel, that it might as well be left alone?"

"It is the order of the court," answered the colonel, bristling up. "I suppose the court knew what it was doing."

"Perhaps so; but I would hate to bet heavy on that. Do you suppose you can find that dodrotted fence?"

"Find it? Of course I can find it. That is, I know where to look for it. I remember when it was built. That was what my father and Jake Helmsley had the fight about."

"There is likely to be another fight about it, I reckon, and I don't like to be mixed up in that sort of thing. I suppose the Helmsleys will be on hand."

"Of course they will, and we will have to go armed."

"What sort of a show will that give me, colonel? A mighty pleasant position I will have, between your two fires. I think you had better settle that business, and make an end of it."

"I think so, too," chimed in Marshall Fowle.

As the colonel flared up again, his son slipped out at the front door.

He had caught sight of a colored boy coming down the road, and recognized him as one of Arthur Helmsley's "niggers."

Suspecting that some sort of a conciliatory message had been sent by Arthur, and knowing that his father was not in a mood to treat such a communication politely, he hurried out to intercept the messenger.

There was a note for him, as he guessed, and its contents proved to be so interesting that Marshall contrived to call out Fred Henning and show it to him privately.

Fred was also interested in the note.

"That is a right good point, my boy," said he. "You can rely upon me to act upon it if there is any sort of a chance."

When the two young men returned to the house they found the family caucus progressing slowly.

The sheriff was mildly protesting, Colonel Fowle was loudly grumbling, and the women-folks were sadly silent.

"I am ready to go with you, father," said the young gentleman.

"And I will make one of the party, if there is no objection," added Fred Henning.

"You must not forget your weapons," remarked the colonel.

Marshall took down his rifle from its rack, and Flush Fred displayed an efficient revolver.

Ella Fowle stepped forward with tears in her eyes.

"Please, Mr. Bryson, don't let them fight," she begged.

"How am I to help it, my child?"

"You are the sheriff of the county, and ought to be able to do something."

"I wish I could; but if they take a notion to fight, I might as well try to stop the Mississippi from running down-stream."

"Then I will go with you, and see what I can do toward keeping the peace."

"You will do nothing of the kind," declared the colonel. "Those who don't care about keeping up the dignity of the family may sulk as they please; but our flag shall never be lowered while I live."

The party set out, the colonel and the sheriff in advance on horseback, Marshall Fowle and Fred Henning next, and three unwilling colored men with axes and spades bringing up the rear in a farm-wagon.

When they reached the old field all but the colonel were struck by its cheerless and forlorn appearance, and a sickening sense of its worthlessness pervaded the party.

But the leader brightened up and bristled up when he saw it, as if it were a paradise which life and fortune might well be spent in defending.

Across its barren and yellow expanse, seamed by red gullies, they saw the enemy.

Arthur Helmsley and his three cousins were there, grouped near the remains of a rotten old fence, of which but a few rails here and there were visible.

After a little conversation with Colonel Fowle, the sheriff walked across the broom-sedge and joined the Helmsley party.

They received him pleasantly, but at the same time rather coolly.

"I suppose you know," he said, addressing himself to Arthur Helmsley, "that I have been ordered to remove a fence from this field. Is this the fence?"

"Indeed I don't know, Mr. Bryson," answered Arthur with a smile.

"If it is, it seems to be hardly worth removing."

"Such as it is, you are welcome to do what you please with it, for all I care."

Jack Bryson smiled.

This seemed to be quite a propitious beginning of the unpleasant business.

"No!" exclaimed Harry Hotspur, who had been waiting for this manifestation of "weakness" on the part of his cousin.

"There is the fence, Jack Bryson, and there it will stay, while a bit of the wood remains above ground. With all respect for you, sir, and without the least wish to harm you or to bother you, I say that neither you nor any other person shall touch that fence."

"I was speaking to Arthur Helmsley, and I

believe that he is the man who claims this land," mildly suggested the sheriff.

"I care nothing for what Arthur claims or don't claim. This a matter that concerns the Helmsley family, and that fence is not to be touched while I live."

"But I have an order of the court, Harry, and am bound to obey it."

"Blank the court! No durned fool court is going to chisel us out of our rights while we are able to maintain them. There are the Fowles, waiting to crow over us, and it will be the last crow for some of them if this thing goes on. Go back to them, Jack Bryson, and tell them that we are ready for them, and let me beg you, for old friendship's sake, to keep out of the way of the fight."

"Very well, Mr. Helmsley," answered the sheriff, bristling up in his turn. "If there is any fight, I shall hold you responsible for it, and it is you that I will settle with."

Arthur Helmsley had said nothing.

Perhaps he was of the opinion that it might relieve his cousin Harry's mind if he were allowed to do all the talking.

But, as the sheriff turned away, he bestowed upon that official a wink of capacious dimensions.

Jack Bryson, without another word, walked across the old field toward the Fowle party.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WAGER OF BATTLE.

As the sheriff walked from the Helmsley faction toward the Fowle faction, it would seem to an outside spectator that there was nothing to prevent a bloody fight.

Harry Hotspur and his brothers were evidently of that opinion, as they examined their rifles carefully; but Harry was as cool as his cousin Arthur, if not as indifferent.

"Somebody is going to get hurt, I reckon," he remarked. "Jack Bryson is as mild as a lamb; but he is chuck-full of fight when he gets waked up."

"He is too good a man for the county to lose," quietly answered Arthur.

Then there was a change in the scene.

Just a slight change.

Only a girl, mounted on a fine sorrel horse, who rode up within sight of them all, but at a reasonable distance from both parties, and halted on a knoll near a bit of woods at the southward.

Hardly had she taken her station there, when another girl rode up, mounted on a beautiful bay, and joined the other.

After a brief hesitation they greeted each other affectionately, and stationed themselves on the knoll, their horses' heads turned toward the belligerents.

The first arrival was Kate Helmsley, and the second was Ella Fowle.

Each of them had been actuated by the same impulse—to endeavor to keep the peace between the possible combatants.

Their appearance created quite a sensation, but not a noisy one.

"Is that your sister there, on the sorrel nag?" asked Harry Hotspur.

"Yes, that seems to be Kate."

"What in thunder is she doing there? Hello! there is another. Is that Tom Fowle's daughter?"

"Yes, that is Ella Fowle."

"Creation! What has brought them here?"

"Their horses, I judge," quietly answered Arthur.

"Arthur, this is no time for nonsense."

Harry Hotspur, however, laid down his rifle where it would be out of sight of the girls, and his brothers followed his example.

The sheriff, in the meantime, had reached the Fowle party, and there was a brief confab on that side.

"Who is that tall, dark-complexioned man over yonder?" asked Harry Hotspur.

"That is Fred Henning," answered Arthur—"the man you know of as Flush Fred."

"The man who gave your sister that sorrel mare?"

"Yes; and I would be glad to meet him."

"So would I, at some other time and place. Hello! what is he doing?"

Flush Fred had separated from the Fowle party, and was riding slowly toward the Helmsley side.

When he reached them he dismounted, calmly and nonchalantly, and shook hands with Arthur, who introduced him to his cousins.

They received him pleasantly, but at the same time somewhat coldly, just as they had received the sheriff.

As he was not a Fowle, he could hardly be regarded as an enemy, and the presence of the girls, though at a distance, operated as a restraint upon warlike tendencies.

"You seem to be enjoying a neighborhood difficulty here," remarked Fred in his usual cheerful way. "I understand that there is some sort of a fence that gives some sort of offense."

The atrocious pun was well received, notwithstanding the proverbial inability of Tennesseeans to take a joke, and Fred followed up the effect by producing a flat bottle.

"I have here," he said, "about the purest and oldest and oiliest article in the way of whisky that you are likely to find as you journey through this world of sin and sorrow, and you will greatly oblige me if you will sample it."

The "article" was duly sampled and highly approved.

"Of course none of you could be expected to straddle the fence," continued Fred. "I suppose it would be hard to find enough of it to straddle. So the only way to settle the difficulty is a fight."

Harry Hotspur assented to this proposition at once.

"Of course you would not want to kill the sheriff, who would gladly be out of the scrape, or me, as I am an outsider. Suppose, now, you should agree to settle this whole business by single combat."

"That suits me exactly," Harry instantly declared. "If Tom Fowle or his son is willing to meet me or my cousin Arthur, with rifles or pistols or knives, we are ready right now."

"That is not just the kind of combat I was thinking of," observed Flush Fred.

"Indeed! What then?"

"I understand that Harry Helmsley—I believe that is you, sir—"

Harry Hotspur nodded.

"Is the champion seven-up player of this part of Tennessee. I think you ought to be, as I have often heard of you, on the river and elsewhere, and your play has been highly spoken of by the best judges."

Harry Hotspur actually blushed.

No higher compliment could be paid him, in his opinion, than that which he had just received.

It exalted him immensely in his own estimation and in that of his brothers.

"I believe I do play a pretty good country game," said he.

"You are too modest, Mr. Helmsley," replied Fred. "I know that you have the reputation of playing a splendid game. I make some pretensions to seven-up, too, and my friends brag on me. But I have never come across such a player as you are said to be, and I have longed for a chance to tackle you."

"I would be right glad to meet you on such a field, Mr. Henning. But what has that to do with this fence business?"

"It is the style of single combat I was thinking of. Suppose you and I play a rub of seven-up, with the old field for a stake, the games to settle which side shall have it."

Harry Hotspur hesitated.

The proposition struck him singularly, but not unfavorably.

While those girls were looking on there could hardly be a satisfactory fight; but something would have to be done.

The high compliments paid him had put him on his mettle, and it would not be easy to refuse a challenge to play his favorite game, no matter at what stake.

If he should refuse, there were some who might say that he was afraid, and he would rather be taunted with cowardice as a fighter than as a gamester.

Yet it would not do to make any show of yielding, and therefore the proposition must clearly come from the other side.

Arthur said nothing.

He was well acquainted with Harry's disposition, knowing that the compliments had touched him in a soft spot, and that he would naturally want to accept Fred Henning's offer.

Therefore he let his cousin do the talking and manage the matter to suit himself.

"Did the Fowles send you over here to make that offer, Mr. Henning?" inquired Harry.

"Not exactly. Indeed, nobody sent me but myself. It occurred to me when I heard that you were here, and I merely said that I would run across and try to get up a game with you."

"Suppose you go and find out whether they will stand to what you say? While you are gone, I will ask my people what they think of it."

"All right; but I am sure that the folks over there will agree to it," replied Fred, as he started off.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE OLD FEUD SETTLED.

It was quite true, as Fred Henning said, that nobody had sent him but himself.

But he had consulted with Marshall Fowle before they left the house, and was merely carrying out the plan that he and that young gentleman had agreed upon.

It was then necessary to gain the consent of Colonel Fowle to the seven-up style of settling the difficulty.

That was not an easy thing to do; but Fred Henning and the sheriff and his son all set upon him at once, and succeeded in placing the matter before him in a favorable light.

"Harry Helmsley wants to fix it that way," said Marshall, "and you know, father, that Mr. Henning can beat him."

"He can do it if any man can," replied the colonel; "but that scalawag over there, they tell me, is a master hand at seven-up."

Flush Fred expressed entire confidence in his ability to win, and the colonel declared that he would be willing to give "quite a pile" to see them play.

"You can see it for nothing, and make money by the sight," remarked the sheriff.

On the other side the discussion was less animated, and was sooner brought to an end.

Harry Hotspur's brothers, who believed in him implicitly, were ready enough to assent to whatever he thought proper to do.

But Arthur, when his opinion was asked, hesitated a little.

"If I thought you could win—" said he.

"Win?" exclaimed Harry. "Of course I can win. I would like to see the man who can beat me at seven-up."

"All right, if you say so. Go in and win."

Jack Bryson came up from the other side to say that the Fowles were ready for the combat, and then the Helmsley faction moved down to the middle of the old field, where they were met by their opponents.

The meeting was evidently a peaceful one, and it attracted the two girls, who, after a little hesitation, rode forward gradually until they reached the group.

But their relatives and friends were then so absorbed in an affair of immense importance, that the presence of Kate and Ella was almost unnoticed.

As for cards, Flush Fred and his antagonist were both supplied with those weapons of warfare; but it was agreed that they should use Henning's pack, which was entirely new.

Colonel Fowle was the judge for his friend, and Arthur Helmsley for the other side, and Sheriff Bryson was unanimously chosen as umpire.

It was also agreed that the "short rub" should be played, by which the contest would be settled within three games.

A coat was about to be spread upon the yellow broom-singe to serve as a table, when Kate Helmsley pulled off her shawl and threw it into the ring.

Flush Fred looked up at her and smiled.

He had perceived that she was riding the horse which he had sent her, and it was quite natural that he should feel in fine feather.

The combatants seated themselves on the ground, facing each other, their judges behind them, and the umpire at the side. The others were compelled to stand around at a respectful distance.

Fred Henning won the deal, and the game proceeded amid intense silence, not a word being spoken except the few remarks that the players were compelled to make.

The judges and the umpire had nothing to do but keep the account, which was a very simple matter.

Both the combatants were so skillful, and at the same time so wary, that no dispute could arise between them.

The only advantage—considering the chance of cheating as an advantage—was in the deal, and if one "put up" the cards to suit himself, the other had the same privilege.

In that art, which was not regarded as cheating, both were skilled, and neither objected to the operations of the other.

Harry Hotspur won the first game by a close shave, and his face brightened; and his brothers were highly encouraged, while Colonel Fowle looked very glum.

But Flush Fred won the second game quite easily, and the countenances changed.

The third and decisive game was watched with the most absorbing interest, and the spectators encroached without objection upon the limits that had been allowed them.

Harry Hotspur was obviously anxious and excited.

Fred Henning was calm and apparently indifferent.

When three hands had been played, the score stood six and six.

Each had one point to make, and it was Helmsley's deal.

Of course there was an advantage in the "beg," which Fred Henning had; but there was the deal—and oh! what an advantage a skillful gamester can find in the deal!

If Harry Hotspur should turn up a jack, the game would at once be his.

It was fully expected, and it was doubtless his intention, that he should turn up a jack, and his supporters had a confident look, while Colonel Fowle was decidedly down in the mouth.

He had dealt three cards apiece, when his opponent made a casual remark.

"The bottom card of that pack," said Flush Fred, "is the jack of clubs."

This was a stunner in its way.

If the dealer was to turn up a jack surreptitiously, and was not allowed to steal it from the bottom, where would be find it?

That sort of thing would upset the calculations of the best seven-up sharp.

Harry Hotspur's face turned red, and he gave a quick glance at his opponent, who evidently knew what he was talking about.

Then he dealt the remaining three cards apiece, and turned up a trump, which was

not the jack of clubs, but the nine of that suit.

"I am out," said Fred Henning, laying down his hand, which contained the ace of clubs.

Nothing remained to be said or done.

There were those who would have liked to be told how Fred knew the position of that jack of clubs, but none of them cared to inquire too closely into the fine points of such a game as that.

Kate Helmsley clapped her hands.

"Are you glad we lost?" demanded her cousin Harry.

"I would have applauded just the same if you had won," she replied. "I am so glad that there is an end of the old horror."

Arthur declared that nobody could be gladder than he was.

"I believe I am glad it is settled, too," said Harry. "Colonel Fowle, you are welcome to that mangy old field."

"I am sure that I don't want it," replied the colonel.

"There is nobody in this country who is poor enough to take it as a gift," remarked his son.

"What will become of it, then?" inquired Harry.

"Suppose," suggested Fred Henning, "you leave the court of chancery in full possession of it, with all its income and profits."

"Ah! that's where the trouble comes in. We have settled the difficulty among ourselves, but how are we going to get out of the court of chancery?"

"If you will quit paying the lawyers, Mr. Helmsley, I think they will let you out after a while."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CAPTURE OF THE SUNSET.

"SERIOUSLY, gentlemen," said Flush Fred, when his flask had been passed around and favorably inspected, "it is a good thing for you and for the neighborhood that this business had been settled, as it gives you a chance to work together in a matter that is of far greater importance."

"What is that?" asked Harry Helmsley.

"The robberies and thefts and swindles that have more or less annoyed nearly everybody about here. I have a story to tell you about them, which may as well be told right here, while we are out in the open, with no possible spies in sight."

Colonel Fowle and his son were pretty well acquainted with that story; Arthur Helmsley had got hold of portions of it, and Sheriff Bryson had been given a hint of it.

But all were eager to hear it fully and in detail, and Fred Henning told it to them, from the first discoveries to the latest.

Jack Bryson was more than surprised to learn that such a criminal as John Munford had been living among them, carrying on his nefarious operations there and elsewhere, quite unsuspected by any of his neighbors.

All of them were of the opinion that the thanks of the neighborhood, and much more than thanks, were due to the stranger who had prosecuted the investigations at his own expense and risk, and had brought them so near to a successful conclusion.

Harry Hotspur was for immediate action to break up and punish the Munford gang, and this was of course the general sentiment.

The only question was as to the course to be pursued.

Flush Fred was naturally looked to for advice on this point, and he gave it unhesitatingly and clearly.

"The little steamboat of which I spoke," said he, "is hid at the bank up the river. She is partly loaded with plunder, and they expect to put more on her to-night and leave the country. I can't say whether they mean to strike a parting blow or not; but they should be anticipated, whatever their intention may be. There are enough of you, now that you are united, to capture that craft and the Munford gang and all their plunder, and the only thing necessary is for the sheriff to pick out the men he wants and take command of them."

The plan of the campaign was discussed and settled before they left the old field, and when they separated each knew exactly what he was expected to do.

The night that followed was unusually dark.

There was no moon, and the sky was completely obscured by heavy clouds.

At the mouth of Bull Slough Branch, as a sluggish little stream in a swampy district was styled, the little steamboat Sunset lay, well hid by the high bank and the overhanging bushes and vines.

She was a stern-wheeler, and those who had to do with her were wont to say that she could be run with an armful of wood and a bucket of water.

As she lay there, quite out of the way of all legitimate business, and concealed from view on the land side, her crew consisted of one engineer, one fireman, and one deck hand.

They were seated on the forward part of the boat, puffing vigorously at their cob-pipes, to the great annoyance of myriads of musketoes that were thirsting for their blood.

"Ain't it 'bout time them folks was comin' along?" asked the fireman, whom Nature had made quite black enough for his business.

"Reckon it is," replied the engineer, a lanky and dried up white man, who seemed to have no blood in his body to spare to the musketoes.

"I'll be powful glad to git away from yar, fur one. Dese Tennessee 'skeeters is de wu'st I know ob along de ribber."

"Better eat less and drink more, Clem, and mebbe they won't bother yer."

"Ise rudder nab de 'skeeters den de jimjams. Don't we ort to be startin' up de flah 'bout now?"

"Plenty time. It's as easy to git steam up as to b'le a teakettle. Wait till the boss comes and gives the orders."

"Dey's comin' now," said the deck hand, a highly-colored individual, who also officiated as cook.

"How do you know that?" gruffly demanded the engineer.

"Don't you hear the steps in de brush?"

There was such a noise; but it was difficult to say whether it was caused by men or minks.

"They don't come that way," remarked the engineer, with the air of one whose say-so is sufficient to settle a point.

"It's sumfin', dough. Dar 'tis ag'in."

The Sunset lay close against the bank, the top of which was some ten feet above her boiler deck; but at the bow there was a slope that had been used for easy access, leading down to her narrow gangplank.

The noises that had been heard were not in the direction of the slope, but near the edge of the bank.

"Tis somebody, fur shuah," said the fireman.

Among the foliage that bordered the bank, the dark form of a man was for a moment dimly visible.

"Who's that?" demanded the engineer.

"All right," answered a gruff voice.

"That you, boss?"

"The boss is coming right along."

Things looked suspicious. The voice was not recognized, and none of the gang had ever before approached the boat in that style.

The engineer got up and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

As he did so a man jumped from the bank to the deck at his side.

Another and another followed, and then several more came down the slope and over the gangplank.

The crew made no attempt at resistance, but implicitly obeyed the orders that were given them to make no noise, and they were tied and placed under guard.

"That was an easy job," said Harry Helmsley, who had been the first to jump aboard.

"Shall we make a light and search the boat, Jack?"

"Not yet," replied the sheriff. "We must lie low and keep quiet until we can catch the main crowd."

"Suppose we go and hunt them, then?" suggested Arthur.

"I think not. Fred Henning said that we had better wait here while he went up the slough to look for them."

"I hope he won't get into trouble," said Marsh Fowle. "The night is very dark, and the land about here is badly cut up."

"He is pretty well able to take care of himself, I reckon. He told me not to stir unless I heard a shot."

"Hark! there's a shot!" exclaimed Marsh.

"Yes, and another!" shouted Arthur Helmsley, and he leaped to the shore, followed by most of his comrades.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FLUSH FRED'S DEADLY DANGER.

JOHN MUNFORD was at his house, preparing for his departure.

The dark night favored his purposes, and all his arrangements worked well.

His son and Dave Hertsey were with him, and so were his other confederates.

In fact, the entire Tennessee contingent, eight in number, not counting the colored servants, were present and ready for action.

It was the intention of the "boss" to leave the State temporarily, and to make a cruise on the river which should combine business with pleasure.

He would thus dispose of the plunder that had been acquired in that neighborhood, and remove all traces by which his complicity in the recent depredations could possibly be proved.

The prospect was a pleasing one to all present, with one exception, and Pressley Munford was the exception.

He was downcast and evidently distressed.

"Cheer up, Press," said his father. "It ought not to worry you to be left alone here for a little while."

"It is not that," replied the young man. "I had hoped that I would have before now a wife to keep me company; but all our plans to catch her have fallen through so far, and when you go away I am afraid that my last chance goes with you."

"Don't be so chicken-hearted, boy. There is nothing to fret about in that quarter. Tom Fowle will never let his girl marry that feller Helmsley and she won't marry anybody else. I won't be long away, and when I come back it will be queer if I don't straighten up things to suit you. All you have to do is to stay here and keep quiet and take care of the plantation, with Dave Hertsey to advise and help you."

The plunder that remained to be taken to the Sunset consisted of the lighter and more valuable articles that had been secured by the careful collectors of the "association."

It was easy to carry, and the greater part of it was packed in a wagon drawn by two mules, the remainder being stowed away upon the persons of John Munford and his confederates.

In darkness and silence the mule team set forth, escorted by all the members of the band there present, except Pressley Munford.

The seven men were well armed, and were all ready for any desperate emergency, though there was not the slightest reason to apprehend any sort of an interruption.

Shortly after leaving the house they struck off into a little lane that led into the dense woods, where the heavy foliage made the darkness so deep that the mules' heads were scarcely visible to the men who walked at their sides.

From the lane they found their way into a wagon trail that could not be called a road.

It wound through a forest of tall cypress and sycamore trees, through gullies and dry sloughs, at times touching the edge of a swamp, and at times taking them into a bed of mud.

The route was so difficult, and the darkness was so intense, that the greatest care was necessary to guide the team through its intricacies and prevent the entire outfit from being lost or swamped.

Consequently their progress was slow and tedious, and before they reached the river, though they

were then not far from it, the wagon got stuck in a slough, and they were obliged to stop and rest.

A lantern was lighted, and they looked about to make sure that they had not got out of their course.

The slough was narrow and deep, but was nearly dry, only a little mud being left at the bottom, in which the team had stalled.

Immense trees overshadowed it, and from one side the nearly horizontal branch of a giant sycamore stretched across it.

Though the lantern made the darkness more evident, it enabled the men to perceive that they were in no serious difficulty, and they merely stopped to give themselves and the mules rest.

While the inevitable flasks were being brought out and tested, something happened that startled both the men and the mules.

A portion of the moist and friable bank at the slough.

This was a small matter; but it was not all.

The earth did not fall of its own accord, and something else happened just then that showed why it fell.

A man came tumbling down with it.

He rolled down the crumbling bank to the soft bottom of the slough, and stopped nearly at the feet of the mules.

They started forward and pulled the wagon out of its ruts, and the men started to investigate the intruder.

He scrambled to his feet as soon as possible, and endeavored to defend himself; but they seized him before he could draw a weapon, and held him firmly while they inspected him.

He was a tall and fine-looking man, neatly dressed, although his clothes had gathered some of the mud of the slough, and he glared defiantly at his captors.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" roughly demanded Dave Hertsey.

The stranger said nothing.

Being who and what he was, and finding himself in the power of that gang, there was nothing he could gain by speaking.

As the lantern was held so that its light fell on his face, John Munford uttered one of his most fearful imprecations.

"That infernal scoundrel!" he shouted. "Boys, do you know who this scamp is?"

There was one who knew.

That one was Charley Schramm; but it was clearly best for his friend's sake as well as his own that he should hold his tongue.

The others gave no sign of recognition, and John Munford answered for them.

"It is Fred Henning, known on the river as Flush Fred, a man I have sworn to kill. What were you spying about here for, you scoundrel?"

"I am no scoundrel. I was wandering in the woods, and lost my way in the darkness."

"You lie, you dog! You have been caught sneaking and playing the spy."

"Have it so, if you choose," coolly answered Fred, who knew that he had no mercy to expect at the hands of John Munford under any circumstances.

"I have sworn that I would kill you," declared his ancient foe.

"Very well. I have no doubt that you would be coward enough to kill an unarmed man."

"You may bet your last dollar that I am man enough to do it. When I last saw you I said that I would wait to see you hung, and the time has come sooner than I expected."

"What time?"

"The time for your hanging, curse you! Are you fool enough to suppose that I am going to let you get away from here alive?"

"I suppose you will do the worst you dare to do."

"Then I dare to string you up right here, and that is what I mean to do. What do you say, boys? Here is a spy. There is no more doubt that he is a spy than that we are standing here. Not counting the grudge I have against him, don't he deserve death? Has anybody a word to say against hanging him here and now?"

Nobody uttered a word of objection to that proposition—not even Charley Schramm, who kept in the background and eyed his friend wistfully.

There was, indeed, a general murmur of assent to the proposition, as if a hanging was the one thing needful to give the party a good send-off.

"Hanged he shall be, then!" shouted John Munford. "Dave, bring me that rope out of the wagon."

The rope that Dave brought was a stout clothesline, admirably suited to the purpose for which it was wanted.

A little too admirably, the captive may have thought.

There can be no doubt that he bitterly regretted the mistake he had made in the darkness, when he stepped too close to the edge of the bank, in his desire to get a good view of the party in the slough, and was tumbled down among them.

Whatever his feelings may have been, he gave no sign of any feeling whatever, except that in the faint light of the lantern his face seemed to be pale and set.

His captors went to work in a speedy and business-like

John Munford, almost crazy with passion, rushed to the rope, and took hold of it with Dave Hertsey. Charley Schramm, who had been in the background, stepped forward quickly.

"Don't do that!" cried the hunchback. "Don't dare to hang that man! Drop the rope, or you will get hurt!"

"Hello!" exclaimed John Munford. "What jack-a-doodle is this who is going to jump in and stop the show? Knock him in the head, there, some of you! Run this scamp up, Dave!"

Dave Hertsey threw his weight upon the line, but fell forward on his face as a pistol-shot startled the echoes of the forest.

Charley Schramm stood there with a smoking revolver in his hand, trembling with excitement.

Men rushed upon him; but a bullet was the first to reach him.

John Munford had fired immediately after the fall of his friend, and his shot was fatal.

This tragic incident, so entirely unexpected, upset the quiet party in the slough.

Death had struck in among them like lightning.

The hunchback was dead.

John Munford's bullet had entered his brain, and he gave no sign of life after he touched the ground.

Dave Hertsey expired after a few convulsive gasps.

John Munford, of course, flew into a fearful passion, and swore horribly.

"They must have been partners, those two," he said, as he kicked the corpse of poor Charley. "Say, boys, what do you reckon has become of the parson?"

"Here he is, John Munford!" answered Flush Fred, who had been given no chance to escape in the excitement.

An idea had come into his head that might possibly lead to his salvation, and it was worth while to endeavor to gain a little time.

A pistol-shot had been named by him as a signal for his friends, and there had been two shots.

"Here he is, John Munford!" he repeated. "I am the Rev. Samuel Sawtell, at your service."

"Are you speaking the truth?" demanded Munford, who was quite bewildered by this shock.

"The straight and level truth. As you are bound to kill me, I am going to give you the solid facts, so that you may be sure that you have something to kill me for. I joined your cursed gang for the purpose of finding out your secrets and exposing them, and I have done so, and your race is run, you black-hearted villain!"

"You lie!" roared Munford. "I don't believe a word you say. Give me some proof. Tell me one of my secrets that you knew."

This exactly suited Fred Henning's purpose of gaining time, and he proceeded to sketch his career in connection with the gang in Arkansas and Tennessee, closing his account with the episode of the mulatto girl.

Fred's sarcastic mention of that affair drove his old enemy to frenzy, and he rushed for the rope.

"That is not all the story," said the captive, who would have been willing to gain a little more time.

"It's enough, you sneaking spy! If it was the last act of my life, I would string you up for that. Lay hold of this rope, boys!"

Three men took hold of the rope with the "boss," and it tightened suddenly, and Fred Henning was rapidly run up into the air.

"Make the line fast, boys," shouted Munford.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE line was never made fast.

It was dropped so quickly that the man who had been drawn up came down on a run, and fell upon the ground, an unconscious heap.

This change in the programme was caused by the rapid firing of a number of rifle and pistol-shots, most of which were aimed at the men who had hold of the rope.

At the same moment three men jumped down into the slough, and were quickly followed by others.

The three who were first on the spot were Harry and Arthur Helmsley, and Marshall Fowle.

Harry Hotspur ran at John Munford, firing at him as he ran, and clinched him as soon as he reached him.

The other two ran to the man who lay under the branch of the sycamore, and raised his head from the ground.

"Bring a light!" shouted Arthur Helmsley. "If they have killed him, every scoundrel of them shall die for it!"

The struggle that ensued after the interruption of Sheriff Bryson and his posse could hardly be called a fight.

There were but five of Munford's men left, including himself, and more than one of them had been badly hit by the scattering volley that was fired down into the slough.

Those who remained could only endeavor to escape, and one of them succeeded in running up to the head of the slough and getting out of the way in the darkness.

The others were captured and securely bound, and John Munford was one of those who were taken alive.

Harry Hotspur had shot him in the leg; but he was still full of fight and as strong as an ox, and the young gentleman would have been severely handled if others had not come to his assistance.

As for Flush Fred, he had reason to thank his stars that his friends had, as he hoped they would, taken Charley Schramm's shot for a signal.

But it was well for him that he had succeeded in delaying matters as far as he did.

The breath had been choked out of him, and he had been badly bruised and shocked by his fall from the tree; but Arthur Helmsley and Marshall Fowle coaxed back the breath, and soon he was able to sit up and speak to them.

By the time he had told the story of his peril, and the necessary preparations for departure were made, he was able to hobble along with the rest.

He insisted that the body of the hunchback should be well cared for, and his wish was respected.

The wagon was partially unloaded, and the team was turned around, and Charley's body was loaded in with John Munford and another wounded man.

One died before they started, and his body, with that of Dave Hertsey, was left for subsequent removal.

The man who had been taken alive and unhurt was pressed into service as a guide, and, under the direction of Fred Henning, the party picked their way through the forest to John Munford's house.

Fred directed the main body with the wagon to halt at a little distance, while he went forward with Sheriff Bryson and another.

There he hailed Pressley Munford, and shortly the young man threw up a window.

"Is that you, parson?" he asked. "Where have you come from?"

"We have all come back; that is, most of us have. We got into trouble."

"What is the matter? Where is father?"

"Out here in the wagon. He has been badly hurt."

"Is it possible? What has happened?"

"Come down and see."

Pressley Munford came down to the front door immediately, and was placed under arrest.

The wrath of John Munford when he was carried into his own house and laid on his own bed was beyond his power of expression.

He could only lie there and grit his teeth, and even the sight of Fred Henning failed to force him to open his mouth.

The next day the news of the night's work was spread far and wide through the country, and it produced a popular commotion.

The astonishment at the discovery of the criminals was as great as the joy caused by their capture and the breaking up of the gang.

Crowds flocked to John Munford's house, to the scene of the struggle in the slough, and to the little steamboat at the river under the bank.

As the recovered plunder was collected and identified, the people were permitted to carry away what belonged to them, and nearly everything that had lately been lost in the neighborhood was found, with the exception of the stolen horses, which had probably been run off into Mississippi and Arkansas.

The prisoners were taken to jail, and in the course of time were tried and convicted of robbery, as no more serious charge could be fastened upon them.

John Munford and his son and two others were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, getting the extent of the law in every case.

Fred Henning was obliged to spend a considerable part of his time in that part of Tennessee, as his evidence was absolutely necessary in the criminal and civil trials.

The planters, appreciating the value of his services, made up a purse which they desired to present to him as a compensation for his loss of time, but he refused to accept it.

Harry Hotspur was deputed to "fix things," and he and another inveigled Fred into a game of poker, at the close of which the purse had passed into his possession.

Colonel Fowle had no difficulty in proving the swindles and thefts that had been perpetrated upon him, and recovered the amount with damages in a civil suit while John Munford lay in prison.

Munford's property was good for the judgment, and in the course of time the colonel paid in full his debt to Fred Henning.

The last place Flush Fred stopped at when the legal proceedings were at an end, was Arthur Helmsley's house, and he was unusually grave and depressed when he took leave of the family there.

"The horse you sent me is a beauty, Mr. Henning," said Kate; "but I know that I ought not to accept such a present."

"But I beg that you will accept it. I want to leave something that you may remember me by."

"There is no fear that we will ever forget you."

"I want to be honest, Miss Helmsley. Has not your brother told you the story? I stole your pet mare, and of course I should replace her. You must either take the sorrel, or send me to the penitentiary."

It was at last agreed that Kate should keep the mare; but Fred's leave-taking was none the less sad and somber.

Arthur Helmsley drove him to the station, and when they parted Fred took his friend by both his hands.

"I may never see you again, Helmsley," he sorrowfully said.

"Why not? Surely you will come to visit us, and that before long."

Fred shook his head sadly.

"Why not, I say? What do you mean by this?"

"You know what I mean, Arthur. You know that I could not be near your sister without wanting her, and she is a young lady of a highly respectable family, while I am nothing but Flush Fred."

Arthur could make no proper answer to this statement; but, when he was married to Ella Fowle, he and others felt that the festivities were not what they ought to be, owing to the absence of Fred Henning.

THE END.

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